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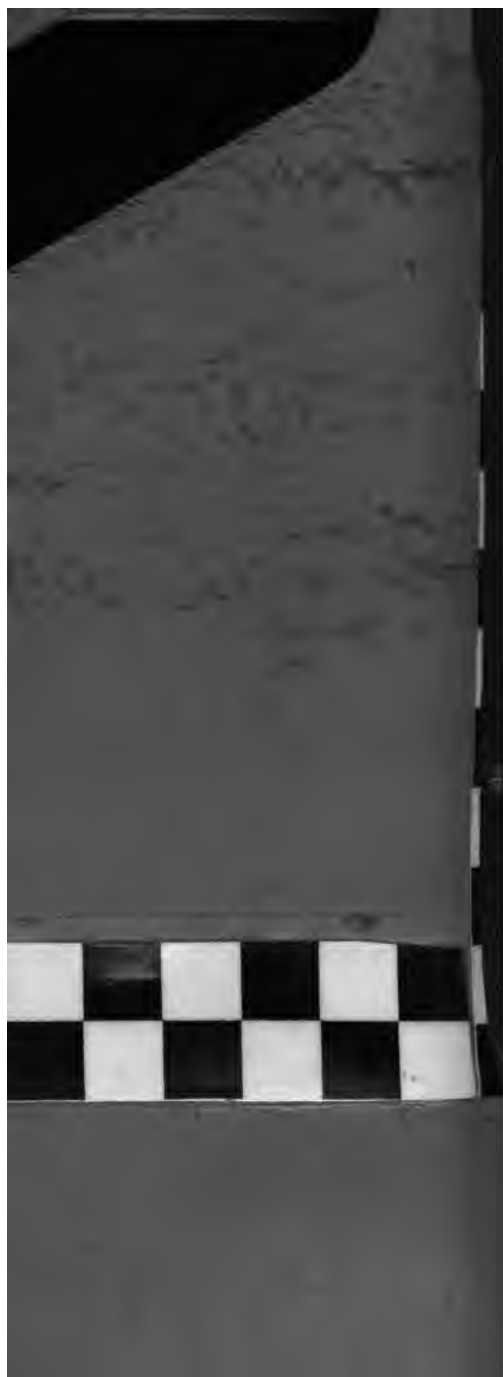
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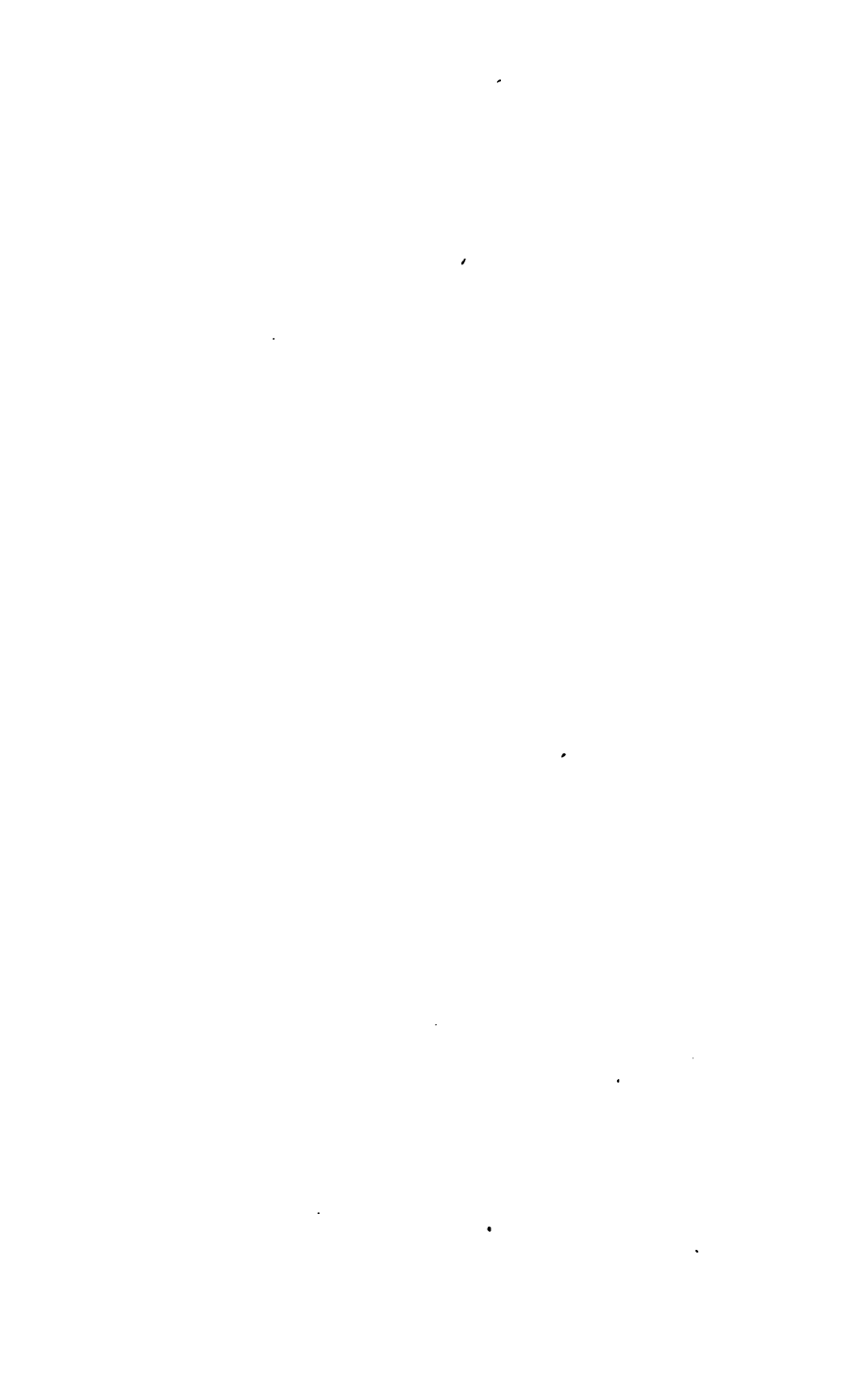
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A LONELY LIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF
WISE AS A SERPENT







A
LONELY LIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"WISE AS A SERPENT," ETC.

Eight Illustrations.



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TO
MY LITERARY GODFATHER,
THE
REV. ROBERT H. BAYNES, M.A.,
VICAR OF
S. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS, COVENTRY,

This Story

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.



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A LONELY LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

PADRE FELIPE.

“AND is that all you know, my son?”

“Yes, all, father.”

“And no apparent prospect of ever ascertaining anything which might decide the question?”

“Far short of that. None, as far as we can see, of ever finding out anything which might even turn the balance of probabilities. A year was spent, and enormous expense incurred, in investigating; and at the end of the time we found ourselves just where we were at the beginning.”

A long silence followed, which each speaker seemed too much occupied with his own thoughts to care to break. The scene of the long conversation which had, for the moment, ended with these words, was a terrace in front of a monastery, half hidden among the vines and olives which covered the steep and picturesque slopes of a secluded bay on the southern coast of Spain. The bay was formed by an irregular promontory, running out some distance into the sea, near the extreme point of which the monastery stood, upon a terrace some height above the water. The terrace was bounded by a low wall, covered with straggling vines

and flowering creepers ; and close to it the two men were seated, looking over such a scene as is to be found only in the Mediterranean. The monastery faced nearly due west, commanding a long sweep of the broken undulating coast line. It was a bright summer's day, with just breath enough of soft south wind to bring the water rippling against the rocks below the terrace with a soothing murmur, loud enough to mingle in a dreamy way with the hum of the cicadas in the trees around, and with the faint rustle of the vine leaves, and to turn, once and again, the leaves of the olives, and send a silver shimmer over their sombre green. Here and there over the sea were scattered a few fishing boats, their sails—hoisted in the vain hope of catching the fickle breeze as it rose and fell—gleaming snowy white in the blazing sunlight. Close to the monastery itself there was a narrow line of golden sand, broken at intervals by jagged masses of dark rock, intervening between the vineyards and the sea ; but at a little distance the rich bright green of the vines, mingled with the more sombre hue of the olives, seemed dipping into the deep blue water ; while every touch of colour along the coast, from the gaily-painted boat, or scarlet cap of some stray fisherman, to the bright dress of some coquettish peasant girl, shone out distinct and vivid in the clear air. Further and further, as the coast receded, the colouring seemed blending more and more, until it all merged in the deep blue distance of the sunny south. It was such a scene as, in this pale cold northern land of ours, will ever come back in dreams to those who have once gazed on its marvellous beauty, like some vision of another world. At the moment, however, it seemed to have little power to attract even a passing glance from either of the two men who were the only occupants of the terrace. Perhaps, under any circumstances, familiarity, to one at least, had robbed the scene of half its power to charm ; but, for the time, there was a deeper cause

than that for their indifference to the wealth of beauty spread out before them.

One was a monk. A tall man with a sinewy form, looking as if it had not always known the peaceful inactivity of a convent life, and a dark handsome Spanish face. In actual years he was perhaps not much past middle age, but he was old in all that really makes a man's age. There were significant lines about his face, which plainly told of those trials and conflicts which are the real tests of age, and of those stormy passions which fight fiercely and die hard in Southern natures, and which must have been trodden to death before he could have endured a convent life, and learned to wear the peaceful look which seemed to overlie the darker lines of his face. His companion was a young man, evidently an Englishman, with a broad massive forehead, and a face below on which there were lines too—lines strange to see on so young a one, and which almost seemed to give it a resemblance to the monk's—a resemblance with a broad gulf of both years and fiery trials between nevertheless.

At last the monk spoke again, in a low deep musical voice,—

“Is your resolution unalterably fixed?”

“Yes, father.”

They were speaking Spanish. The monk with the pure intonation of the old blue blood of Spain. The younger man with perfect ease and fluency, though with a foreign accent.

Padre Felipe turned at the answer, and fixed his keen dark eye full on his companion. The affirmative was rather a faint and hesitating one.

“My son,” he said, laying his hand on the young man's arm, “have you counted the cost?”

“I think I have. But where is the use of the question? What other course is open to me? At least,” he added,

with a slightly haughty ring in his tone, "that an honourable man could for a moment propose to himself."

"True, true," replied the monk, thoughtfully. "The ways of God are very mysterious."

Harold Seton made no answer, and there was another short silence. Then the monk spoke again,—

"My son, when you say you have counted the cost, have you pictured to yourself what your future life must be?"

The young man's brow contracted, and his voice was slightly tremulous, as he answered,—

"I have hardly dared to do it."

"Then listen," answered the monk, with a strange mixture of sternness and tenderness in his tone, "till I draw the picture for you. There are two paths open to every man in this life, whatever his position; but there is but one, my son, which he on whose brow the cross has been signed may choose, and that is the only one I will paint for you. Your life must be a lonely one. You must turn resolutely from the sweet dream of love, because a pure and lawful love can never be yours. No wife must ever rest her head upon your breast, or cheer you on in life with all the mighty power of a woman's love. No childish lips must ever call you father. Alone you must live, and alone you must die, without one thing in this wide world you can call your own. Nor is that all. Your life must be not only a loveless life, it must be a hopeless life, as far as this world is concerned. And there is yet more, my son. There is hot blood in your young veins, which will not cool for many a year; and there will be fierce conflicts with strong passions struggling for the mastery, and striving to blind and ensnare you with specious sophistry. And there will be sore temptations too. Temptations which will come upon you in your most unguarded moments, gaining double power from your lonely life. That is the life that is before you, my son. Have you the courage to face it?"

Harold Seton turned his face away as he asked, in a half-choked voice,—

“Father, why have you painted it so darkly?”

“I have painted it truthfully, because I would not have you put your hand to the plough and then turn back. But remember, I have painted the life, but I cannot paint the spirit and power in which you may enter upon it. That rests with yourself, and there lies all the light or darkness of the path.”

Still Harold Seton was silent, and after a pause, Padre Felipe spoke again,—

“Ah, my son! my son! I would the blighting of all your hopes might lead you where others have been thus led.”

“Where, father?”

“Into the fold of the one true Church, to find peace and rest within her sheltering arms. What is there now to hold you back from the priesthood?”

Harold shook his head. “Have you found peace and rest in a convent life, father?”

The monk’s face darkened. “I have found peace and rest at last, my son. God forbid that you should reach them by the same path. Still, our cases are not similar, nor does the priesthood of necessity mean a convent.”

“It is useless. I cannot accept all the dogmas of your faith. I shall be an heretic to the end of life.”

“But what then is to be your future career?” asked the monk.

“Ah, what, father? I have speculated over that, through many a long hour.”

“There are many honourable callings open to a man with your abilities and education.”

“Yes, many,” exclaimed Harold Seton, bitterly. “Few that are closed, perhaps; but I have learned a lesson on that point, in some of the long hours I have spent among

yonder rocks. I used to think that an honourable ambition, or genuine love of his profession, were inducements enough to urge a man on through life, but I have learned a truth now that I never knew before ; that all such inducements are too closely bound up with hopes and ties on which I must turn my back for ever, not to fade rapidly in such a bleak desolate life as mine. Where is the use of power, wealth, or fame to a lonely man, with none to share his honours, nor to whom to leave his wealth ?”

“There is one career, my son, the rewards of which are in the life to come.”

Harold Seton's brow contracted again. “I have thought of that more than once ; but I have painful doubts. Will you hear the confession of a heretic, father ?” he added with a faint smile. “Not a confession of sins, but of doubts and difficulties.”

“I will hear the confession, whatsoever it be, of any sinner,” replied the monk, “be his creed what it may ; and will endeavour faithfully, as God shall give me wisdom, to lighten his load and guide his footsteps.”

“There is no guidance on this earth I would sooner have,” replied Harold Seton, warmly. “The truth is, father, I have often thought of that career to which you have alluded, and should have, I think, decided before now on taking holy orders, could I fully reconcile my conscience to the step.”

“Your conscience !” repeated the monk, in an accent of surprise.

“Yes, my conscience. Father, on your faith as a priest tell me truly, is it not offering the halt or the maimed in sacrifice ? If I had ever dreamed of entering the Church, before this blow fell upon me, it would have been very different, but I never thought of it then. While one of the brightest careers a man could well picture seemed almost within my grasp, I never dreamed of dedicating my life to

the service of God ; and now, shall I consecrate to Him such a dreary, desolate one as mine must be ?”

The monk bent forward again, and fixed his keen glance on his companion's face as he asked,—

“ Is that the only difficulty ? Remember, it is a solemn and a sacred resolve, that of dedicating your life to God's service. Are you certain it is your firm and steadfast wish to do so, were you but satisfied on that point ? ”

“ I am certain.” There was no tremor in Harold Seton's voice now.

“ Then go fearlessly forward, my son. Your scruples are wrong. Call not common or unclean what God has cleansed. His ways are not our ways, and often, what is but halt and maimed in the sight of man, is in His sight of great price. When He would have the special service of our lives He calls each one of us to the work, and fits each one of us for the work, as He in His infinite wisdom sees fit. The very blighting of all your earthly hopes, in this strange and mysterious manner, is His call to you to give the service of your life to Him. He has struck away all your hopes in this world, in order to lead you to a path the hopes of which are firmly anchored in the life to come. Only be faithful, and follow fearlessly where your Master's footsteps lead the way. Your Church allows her priests the blessings of a domestic life, and the sweet endearing names of husband and father ; and though, as a faithful son of the one true Church, I may not question the wisdom of her decrees, I cannot be blind to the fact that there are many and great advantages in such a system ; still, remember, the greatest of our Master's servants have ever been lonely men ; men who had no ties to bind them down to this fleeting world, or withdraw one single thought from His service. Go forward, my son, dedicate your life to God ; and never doubt but in His own good time He will point out to you the work for which He is, in His wisdom, fitting you now.

Then give your whole heart and soul to that work, and rest assured that, however dark may be your earthly pilgrimage, your reward shall be certain in the life to come."

The monk had kindled into warmth as he spoke, and his words were uttered with southern vehemence and fire. They struck a strange chord in Harold Seton's breast.

"Father," he said, "I never regarded the subject in that light before."

"We are very blind, but the light always comes, at last, to those who seek it. You have striven to act rightly even while the ways of God seemed very dark and mysterious. He will guide you."

"It seems to me as if He has guided me already," Harold Seton replied, "by means of your wise counsels, father."

"Give God the praise, my son. Blessed be His holy name, if He has seen fit to make use of me, the most unworthy of His servants, to throw light upon your path. But hark! there is the chapel bell. Will you not come?"

Harold shook his head. "I cannot join in your services, father," he pleaded; "you know that I should be a mere spectator. Let us rather meet, only, where we can remember everything that unites, and nothing that separates us."

The monk rose without answering, and bending over Harold Seton as he sat, he laid both hands on his head, with almost a mother's tenderness, and murmured a blessing, ere he took his way to the chapel. Harold watched him until his tall commanding form was lost to sight among the shrubs; then, resting his head upon his hands, he remained for some time sitting, where Padre Felipe had left him. At last, he too rose, and descending the steep winding path which led to the beach, continued slowly pacing up and down the sand, with the water rippling at his feet, until long after the sun had set, and darkness had settled down over him and the new and strange tumult of thoughts called up by the monk's words.



See page 8.



CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTIVE.

SOME six-and-twenty years, or thereabouts, before the day when Padre Felipe's words threw such a new and sudden light on Harold Seton's perplexities, the London world was in one of its periodical ferments. It was a very hot season, and a rather dull one as well. There had been a marvellous absence of both lions and scandal, and the season, in consequence, threatened to be a failure, when it suddenly became known that Sir Myles Seton was on his way home from India, his health requiring a change. Now Sir Myles Seton was a lion, or at least capable of being magnified into one, in the present poverty-stricken condition of the London world in that respect; and the largest magnifying power which could possibly be brought to bear upon lions was immediately pressed into the service.

Sir Myles Seton was a hero. In a recent campaign in India he had distinguished himself by some very remarkable act of gallantry, for which he had been knighted, and the praises of which had been loudly trumpeted abroad. The signal service he had rendered was now the subject of universal conversation in London drawing-rooms. It is true no one knew exactly what he had done, but then every one, feeling ashamed of his ignorance, forbore to seek any information on the subject, and only talked in general terms of the extraordinary service Sir Myles had rendered, until it became a sort of fashion to speak of him as having saved our whole Indian empire from ruin.

Perhaps no man was ever more astonished at finding himself a hero than Sir Myles Seton was, when he arrived in London. He knew he had done a plucky thing ; but, to do the man credit, he had too much of the real soldier about him to feel very much self-glorification in consequence ; and a troublesome ball in his left arm had, in his own private musings, sometimes suggested that the honours of knight-hood had been rather dearly purchased. Sir Myles was however a shrewd and far-sighted man. He had not been in London a week before he had taken in, like a consummate general, all the advantages of his position. With a grave and dignified deportment he submitted to being made a lion and a hero. His arm was quite sufficiently recovered to allow him to dispense with his sling, but nevertheless he still wore the sling ; and it went a long way in convincing the world that he must have done something very heroic indeed.

When it became known, which of course it did immediately, that Sir Myles Seton was unmarried ; was a man of good property, and the possessor of a very nice country place in the north of England, his popularity knew no bounds, and he was petted and fairly stormed by adroit dowagers in a way which would have been enough to drive most men off the field. Not so Sir Myles Seton. His heart was just about as cool as his head. He had led a very dissipated life, and being now not far from fifty, and his property being somewhat encumbered, he saw no objection to rendering his newly acquired fame a stepping-stone to an heiress. But Sir Myles was fastidious, and it was some time before he could succeed in finding the sort of heiress he wanted. At last he did, however, and, to her infinite cost, he succeeded also in persuading the object of his choice to become his wife.

Elinor Fane was a young, fresh, pretty girl, with a tolerable fortune. Not quite so large a one as Sir Myles would

have liked, but passable, considering all her other attractions as well. She was, when she met Sir Myles, what so many girls at her age are—she was only eighteen—woman in the rough, if such an expression may be permitted, to be moulded for good or evil, according to the circumstances of their future lives. She was a generous, high spirited, and clever girl, but she was very ambitious. She wanted to climb above the common herd, and to be able to look down upon them all. In her girlish inexperience she accepted Sir Myles Seton at the value of the flash of fame which had lighted him up for the moment; and when he asked her to be his wife she fondly dreamed her wildest hopes were about to be realized, and that she should really be an object of importance in the world. They were married, and the bubble burst. The season was over, and before Lady Seton appeared in London the following spring, she and Sir Myles had sunk to their natural level. Other lions were in the field, and Sir Myles with a wife, was not, even saving that, what Sir Myles a bachelor had been. But alas! poor Lady Seton had but little thought to give to the mortification of finding herself nobody, where she had counted upon a very different position. Far sorer trials than that were already clouding her horizon. Sir Myles' dissipated, profligate life had only been temporarily checked, not ended, by his marriage; and before long she found herself a despised, neglected, and, to say the truth, not seldom an ill-used wife.

Within the second year of her married life Harold was born, and then it seemed as if the cup of Lady Seton's sorrows was filled to the brim. Sir Myles detested children, and declared he was tired of England; so, in spite of the entreaties of the unhappy mother, her child was committed to the care of a woman she disliked, the wife of an old retainer of the family, who lived on the estate, and the moment Lady Seton could travel with safety Sir Myles

started for Italy, taking her with him. Not, however, without a sharp contention. Lady Seton declared, at first, she would not go.

"Oh, well," was Sir Myles' brutal answer, "you may stay here and welcome, though I would rather you went with me—it looks respectable. But you needn't think, my lady, you're going to cross me that way for nothing. I know well enough why you want to stay here. You're thinking about your brat; but I'll be hanged if you're going to get your own way so easily. If you stay here, the brat goes, and I swear you shan't see him again one half so soon as you shall do if you go quietly with me, like a well-behaved wife."

Lady Seton grew very white and rigid. "I'll go with you," she said.

"That's a good girl," said Sir Myles, "you shall come back and see the brat in a year or so, as a reward;" and he stooped to kiss her; but Lady Seton recoiled with a shudder, and with a coarse laugh Sir Myles strode out of the room.

Lady Seton went to Italy, but she was an altered woman from that date; and Sir Myles sometimes felt almost afraid of his stern, cold, silent wife, who seemed as if she was steadily enduring for some settled purpose of her own. For five years Lady Seton never saw her child, save twice, for a few days, at wide intervals; but then Sir Myles got tired of his wandering life, and resolved to settle down at home. Lady Seton might have the child then, he said, if she liked, as long as she didn't let him be bothered with him.

Lady Seton received her child with little outward show of feeling, but she followed him with her eyes wherever he went, and would hardly bear him out of her sight for a moment; and by degrees the hard cold endurance of her manner changed, and a more soft and peaceful look came to her. Her whole life was devoted to Harold, who was

a fine handsome high-spirited boy, and soon lost, under his mother's care, all traces of the disadvantages of his babyhood.

Another five years passed, during which time Lady Seton had lived entirely at Rookwood, never leaving it, even when Sir Myles left. She was a pale silent woman still, looking more like fifty than like thirty, and with very grey hair. What her domestic life was no one knew, though many surmised, and the servants always called her "my poor dear lady." Dear she was to every one, far and near, for her gentleness and goodness; for though the moulding of her life had been a very rough one, it had developed a very perfect model.

But a change was at hand. What slights and insults Lady Seton had endured during those five years at Rookwood, for her child's sake, were known to none save herself. Through all that time Sir Myles seemed to be sinking lower and lower, and strange stories were afloat about visitors who had been seen at the house, with wondering questions as to how long Lady Seton would bear it. At last came a tremendous day of revelry and feasting, prolonged far into the night, with a set of Sir Myles' own boon companions. It was well on towards the morning before Sir Myles staggered up to his room, and then the old butler called up Lady Seton's own maid, and begged her to be in the way; some mischief was on foot, he was certain, from a few words he had heard, though what it was he could not imagine. The two faithful servants softly crept up-stairs to the corridor into which their lady's rooms opened, and kept watch. It was not a very long watch. They had not been there many minutes before a tumult arose in Lady Seton's room. So sudden, and so strangely mingled were the sounds, they could hardly tell which came first; but there was a loud exclamation; a shriek; a burst of brutal laughter, changing in a moment to a howl of terror; and

then, before the startled servants had time to move, the door of the room opened, and Lady Seton, in a long wrapping gown, with her hair streaming over her shoulders, swept out of the room, looking, as her maid said, for all the world like a tigress at bay. She passed rapidly down the corridor without a moment's pause. Almost before the servants had time to think, she was gone down the passage which led to the room where the child slept, and then all was quiet.

Till morning dawned the servants kept their watch, but not a sound disturbed the stillness, and then they left their post. At the usual time Lady Seton's maid went to her lady's dressing-room, and found her there as usual, looking quiet enough, but very pale. She stayed there till about twelve o'clock, keeping Harold with her, and then sent down to know where Sir Myles was. Sir Myles was in the library reading the papers, and, the butler could have added, looking rather cowed and frightened.

Down-stairs Lady Seton went, with a stately, almost triumphant air, very different from her usual manner, and in the library she remained for more than an hour. When she came out there was almost a smile upon her face, and something of its old elasticity seemed to have come back to her step. Her twelve weary years of patient endurance had come to an end. She was free—free to go, and take her child with her. What had passed the night before none ever knew, or how she had turned it to account; but within a couple of hours she had left Rookwood, and the weight was lifted off her life. Her child was safe from the contaminating example of his father's profligate life.

Years rolled on peacefully enough with Lady Seton after her departure from Rookwood. She lived chiefly abroad, devoting herself to the education of her boy, with all a mother's love, and something more than the ordinary wisdom of a mother. She had learned, in the bitter school in which

she had been trained, to take a broader view of life than comes within the scope of most women, and Harold rapidly caught the same tone of feeling. Some of the old ambition of her girlhood began to stir again in Lady Seton as she watched her son's progress. His talents were of a high order. He would be the representative of a long line of illustrious ancestors, and the possessor of an ample fortune. There would be, with such advantages, no career closed to him. On this point, however, she wisely forbore to influence him in the least. With many an earnest prayer for her idolized son she left him to follow whatever course he might choose for himself.

At nineteen Harold Seton went to Oxford, conscious, in a measure, of his own powers, and painting, in imagination, vivid pictures of his own future brilliant parliamentary career. It was a future which was truthful too, as well as brilliant, inasmuch as the boy neither over-estimated his own powers, nor under-estimated the amount of labour necessary before any man, even with brilliant qualities, can securely climb the ladder of fame. Soon after, he paid his first visit to his father. Of later years Sir Myles Seton had greatly changed his mode of life, and Harold went to Rookwood with his mother's full approval. The visit was the last as well as the first. Some years before, Sir Myles had expressed great anxiety to see his son, but when Harold arrived at Rookwood he was painfully conscious of a coldness and constraint about his father's manner which was anything but encouraging. There was an apparent suspicion and distrust in his conduct towards his son, which surprised Harold, and under which he chafed sorely.

Lady Seton sighed as she heard her son's complaints on the subject. Her religion, like everything else about her, partook strongly of the marked individuality of her character, and perhaps in some points she was sadly deficient in orthodoxy. But it was, at any rate, far too muscular to let

her rest until she could feel satisfied that she had entirely forgiven her wretched husband the outrages and insults of her blighted life. It had been a hard struggle, but Lady Seton had conquered at last, though there were some scenes in the past of which she never dared to think; and perhaps the fullest proof that she had entirely forgiven her many wrongs lay in the fact of her anxiety that Harold and his father should meet, in the hope that something like regard, it not affection, might, even at that late hour, spring up between them. That this would have been utterly impossible she was well aware, had her son known but a part of all she could have told him; but never one word had passed her lips, beyond what it was absolutely necessary he should know. All she had ever told him amounted but to the bare facts, that her own unhappiness, and dread of the evil example to himself of his father's dissipated life, had induced her to insist on a separation. It seemed to Lady Seton, now, not difficult to read the riddle of Sir Myles' conduct towards Harold. She laid it once to a belief, on her husband's part, that Harold knew more of the past than he did, and to a consequent impression that he must be an object of, to say the least, profound contempt to his son.

Harold did not go back to Rookwood again. Clearly father and son were better apart, and there was a tacit understanding between them that both were better pleased it should be so. His career at Oxford was a brilliant one, though not meteoric. He was not one of those geniuses of whom every one predicts great things, and who disappear, like meteors, leaving nothing behind them but a confused impression of dazzling brilliancy. But he took high honours, and men who were not in the habit of being dazzled by meteors, foretold that Harold Seton would one day make himself well known in the world.

He was a very popular man in his college, and the day he was proclaimed "a double first" there was a most uproarious

scene in his rooms. That day Harold never forgot. It was the closing scene instead of, as every one believed, the opening one of his brilliant career.

"Telegram, sir," said his scout, laying his hand on Harold's arm, as the only means of making his presence known amidst the roar of congratulations, above which it was hopeless to attempt to make any individual voice heard.

"Telegram, Seton," shouted several voices. "Congratulations from somewhere. Let's see."

"Bet you two to one, Seton, it's your governor come down handsomely in celebration of the joyous event. 'God bless you, my boy—cheque for five hundred at your bankers,'—that kind of thing, you know. Holio! I say! What's the matter? No bad news, I hope,—Seton, you look awfully grave."

Harold Seton looked very grave. The telegram was from Naples, where Lady Seton was awaiting her son. She was dangerously ill. He was not to lose a moment in starting.

He travelled day and night, and only just arrived in time to see his mother alive. It seemed almost hard. Still comparatively a young woman, and all the hopes which had been for so many years centred in her idolized son apparently so near their accomplishment, and she cut off. Not permitted to encourage him in his course, or to glory in his success. Lady Seton did say, God's will be done, but there had been a struggle before she could say it. Could she have looked forward but a very few months she would have perhaps found it hard to say whether she would rather have lived or died; lived for Harold's sake, or died for her own.

A few formal business communications passed between Harold and Sir Myles, and then he went back to Oxford, intending to stay there until the commencement of the next term. He could not shake off the gloom his mother's death

had cast over him, and the deserted college suited him better than any other place. It seemed such a sad omen, just at the moment of his first great success in life. He had never known a sorrow before, and it seemed to him, at the time, as if this blow must darken his whole life.

In less than three months after his mother's death another hasty summons called Harold Seton to Rookwood. It was not illness this time, it was death. Sir Myles Seton had been thrown from his horse, and had broken his neck. All that Harold had to do was to go down, take possession, and investigate the state of his father's affairs.



CHAPTER III.

TRUE OR FALSE?

SIR MYLES SETON died without a will. In all the world there was probably no man more entirely ignorant of the state of his affairs than his son, and it was not without many misgivings that Harold prepared for the task of ascertaining what his own position was.

The only relative of Sir Myles who had attended the funeral, and he was indeed his only near relative in the world besides his son, was his nephew, Ralph Seton, the only son of a younger brother of Sir Myles, who had been dead for many years. Ralph Seton was a barrister, and at least fifteen years older than his cousin. They were staunch friends nevertheless, and Ralph's house in London had always been as much Harold's home as he cared to make it.

Some of his misgivings as to what discoveries an examination of his father's papers might bring to light Harold expressed to his cousin, as they stood at the hall door waiting for the carriage which was to take Ralph Seton to the railway on his way back to London.

"I wish you could stay, Ralph, old fellow, and go over them with me. I don't like the task."

"I wish I could, but I can't spare the time. Still I don't think you need be afraid."

"I don't know. I suspect, from a few words the steward let fall the other day, that everything is in a most glorious state of confusion. My poor father was always talking, he

said, of putting everything in order, and making his will ; and contented himself with talking until too late."

"Well, I doubt whether you will find things so very bad. I know your father was considerably involved at the time of his marriage, but after your birth I believe he succeeded in effecting some arrangement with the trustees of your mother's fortune, by which a certain part of her capital was sunk in retrieving his affairs ; and of late years he has lived so quietly I should think the worst you have to fear is the necessity for economizing a little for a few years. However, if you find yourself in great difficulties you can come to me if you like. I cannot stay here, but if you choose to bring all the papers to London, I will do whatever I can do for you."

"Thanks. I will come if I want help. There comes the carriage. Good-bye." And Harold turned back into the house.

He felt a most unconquerable aversion to begin his task, but it was no use to put it off, so summoning the steward to his aid he set to work.

Everything was, as Harold expected, in a glorious state of confusion ; and he was heartily sick of the whole business before they succeeded in arriving at any clear understanding of the state of affairs. When they did, he found it was as Ralph Seton had said ; he was better off than he expected. Sir Myles had taken an economizing fit for the last few years of his life, and had done much to retrieve his affairs. A year or two, at most, would leave the property quite clear.

"That's better than I hoped," Harold said, rising at last from a long morning's work, and stretching himself with an air of relief, as he stood on the hearth-rug, with his back against the chimney-piece.

"It's very different from what it would have been, Mr. Seton," the steward said, "if Sir Myles had died

ten years sooner. He has saved wonderfully the last few years."

"What made him change so much?"

The steward hesitated. "Well, sir, I don't quite know, but I always fancy that he felt my lady's leaving him more than one would have thought. I sometimes think, after she was really gone, he began so see more clearly how—how——" The man hesitated.

"How badly he had treated her," put in Harold. "Go on."

"Exactly, sir. And perhaps he felt the only reparation he could make her would be to leave things here in a better state at his death. You see, sir, my lady being so much younger, Sir Myles never thought of outliving her; and I think he looked forward to her coming back here with you. In fact, I know he did."

"How do you know?" Harold asked. The steward's words interested him strangely. His life had been so entirely severed from his family that he seemed to know less of the sayings and doings of his own father than many a man does of those of mere acquaintances. Lady Seton had always studiously avoided all reference to the past.

"Well, sir, you know they say Sir Myles broke his neck, and so I suppose he did; but I can't help thinking there was a cause for that. I suspect it was some sort of a fainting fit made him fall. I don't think he'd been well for some time, and I'm sure he had an idea something was wrong. He talked so much, the last few days of his life, about his will, and said he must make it, and that he must put his papers straight, and he talked of some which he must burn. And I remember he said to me one day, laying his hand on that cabinet, 'there'd be a tangled skein if something there came to light;' and then he frowned, as if something was very wrong. But I'm rambling away from what I was going to say about my lady. The very day he was killed I came

in here to speak to him, and he was standing with the cabinet open, and a portrait in his hand. I asked him if he had any orders, and he didn't answer; then, after a moment, without noticing the question, he suddenly held up the portrait and asked, 'Do you know who that is?' 'No, Sir Myles, I don't,' I said. 'Ah,' he said, 'I suppose not. You never saw her look like that. That's Elinor Fane, not Lady Seton.' He spoke very bitterly, and then he added, 'Who'd have thought I should have outlived her—nearly thirty years older?' He looked as if his thoughts were very painful, and then he added, 'I thought she'd have come back here with her—with Harold, and been happy. But she's gone. I say, Rodgers,' and he turned quite sharp to me, 'isn't there something in the Bible about being taken away from the evil to come?' 'I think there is, Sir Myles,' I said. I was really half frightened, his manner was so strange. 'Ah, well, but it mustn't come,' he said. 'I'll burn them to-night; better let well alone now. Yes, I'll do it.'

"Just then his horse came round. He heard his hoofs on the gravel, and he threw the portrait back into the cabinet, and locked it, and went out. But I'm sure, Mr. Seton, Sir Myles' head wasn't right, and I shall always believe it was some kind of fit made him fall from his horse. Though he was past seventy, there wasn't a rider to come near him in these parts."

"But about the burning, Rodgers," Harold said. "What could my father mean? There are no papers here that should have been burned. I think," he added, with a smile, "it is lucky for me he didn't take to burning papers, or we should have never got clear."

"Of course there were none, sir. I knew that. It was just his talking that way made me feel sure his head wasn't right."

"But the portrait," Harold said. "I haven't seen that."

"That's in the secret drawer, sir, I fancy. I think Sir Myles put it there."

"Oh, there's a secret drawer, is there?"

"Yes, sir, up in the corner. But I don't know how to open it."

"Well, never mind now. It is of no consequence."

It was of consequence to Harold Seton, however. He had often wondered, as he grew up, and could better appreciate the ravages which suffering had made upon his mother's face, what she had been like when young; and he felt a very strong wish to see the portrait in question, which, from his father's words, had evidently been taken before his mother's marriage. Then the something that was to be burned troubled him. He could not dismiss the idea, as the steward had done. Were they papers, as his father had said before, or what? Some terrible revelations of past iniquities perhaps. If Harold Seton had ever cared for his father, he would probably have shrunk from the thought of what such hidden records might disclose; as it was he was rather disposed to regard the subject with only an uneasy feeling as to what personal annoyance any unpleasant discoveries might bring upon him. Perhaps he would have indefinitely postponed any search but for the thought of the likeness of the mother whose loss was such an irreparable one to him. The recollection of that made him turn again to the cabinet the moment the steward had left the room. He made several attempts, but all in vain; the drawer was carefully concealed, and at last he gave up the attempt for the moment, reserving it as an amusement for the long evening hours, which were rather tedious in his enforced solitude.

That very evening he set himself to a vigorous assault upon the cabinet. He examined it inside and out, in every direction, and racked his brains to bring to memory every device he had ever seen or heard of for the concealment of

secret drawers, until he positively began to grow excited over a search which presented such unlooked-for difficulties. At last, after more than an hour spent in fruitless attempts, he accomplished, as people so often do, by accident, what he had failed to accomplish by design. In putting back a drawer he had taken out in one of his attempts, he touched a spring; one of the small inner panels of the cabinet slipped, and the drawer was before him. It did not seem to contain very much then; only a red morocco case and a roll of closely written papers, carelessly tied with a piece of string. Harold took up the case and opened it, and was, to tell the truth, a little disappointed. He had fancied his mother must have been very beautiful when young, judging from what he had known her; forgetting that suffering sometimes gives more than it takes from a face. It was so with Lady Seton. The bright, intelligent girl's face before him, with all its beauty of form and colouring, had not half the power to win and charm, of the pale thin lined face, with its marvellous depth of expression, which was Harold's memory of his mother. He felt, as he looked at it, that had she always remained as that likeness painted her, he might have loved her as dearly perhaps, but he never could have revered her as he did; and with almost a wish that he had not seen it, he closed the case again. Then he took out the papers, and seating himself in an easy chair by the fire, untied the string.

The next morning's dawn found Harold Seton still sitting in the same chair, gazing with a helpless, stricken sort of look into the empty grate, in which the last embers of the fire had long since expired, and with the papers clenched tightly in his hand. His face was very white, and had something of the half-stupefied look of a man suddenly and unexpectedly wakened from a sound sleep. It was not till the first sounds of stirring in the house roused him, that he moved. Then, as he rose, he shivered violently: that he

might well do after so long a vigil, but his shiver had something of a shudder in it; and he went up to his room with an unsteady step.

He sent for the steward directly after breakfast, which, however, he never touched.

"Good heavens, sir!" the man exclaimed, "you look very ill."

"Never mind about that. Just see to everything here, will you? till further orders. I'm going to London directly."

"What, to-day, sir?"

"Yes, in a few hours."

"But, Mr. Seton," remonstrated the man, "there is a great deal I should like to settle, and have your orders about, before you leave. I had no idea you were going so soon."

"I can't settle anything," replied Harold, sharply. "Just let everything remain as it is till further orders."

"Everything, sir?"

"Yes, everything."

The tone was so short and decided, it checked a further remonstrance which was rising to the steward's lips, as he thought of the number of horses in the stables, and various other matters of a like nature.

"Very well, sir. I hope I shall hear from you soon."

"You'll hear from some one soon, I dare say," Harold muttered, but not loud enough for his words to reach the steward's ears.

That same evening, as Ralph Seton was running his eye over a brief, the last thing before retiring, the door of his study suddenly opened, and Harold abruptly entered.

"Harold Seton!" he exclaimed, astonished at both his cousin's appearance and manner.

"May be, or may be not," was the reply; "I'm sure I can't tell."

"Can't tell what?" demanded Ralph.

"Whether I am Harold Seton or not," he said, bitterly. "It's a point I've been trying to settle all the way up, without arriving at any opinion on the subject. I'd willingly make a present of half my fortune, or even more, to any one at this moment who would settle the point for me."

Ralph Seton looked at his cousin in silent astonishment. Probably the surmise which at the first moment crossed his mind was the one most likely to occur to any man under the circumstances—that Harold was drunk. But his cousin's look and manner, and still more his short, clear, sharp utterance, banished the suspicion instantly, if it occurred to him; leaving only the hypothesis that something had turned the speaker's brain. He waited a few moments in silence; then finding Harold did not speak again, he said,—

"What can you possibly mean, Harold?"

"Just this, man; that at this moment I have not the least idea whether I am Harold Seton, a man of fortune and the representative of a long line of noble ancestors, or a wretched impostor, ignorant even of what name I have a right to claim."

"Seton, what stange delusion has taken possession of you?"

Without answering, Harold drew from his pocket the packet of papers he had found the night before, and held them towards his cousin.

"Do you know whose writing that is?"

"Your father's, most undoubtedly."

"Say 'my uncle's,' my dear fellow. You may at least be certain of that, I suppose."

"Well, my uncle's, if you like," replied his cousin.

"Then read the title of these papers," Harold said, placing them in Ralph's hand.

Ralph Seton turned to the first sheet, glanced at the heading, and gave a violent start. The page was headed with a strange sentence, written in Sir Myles Seton's own hand.

"Is Harold Seton my son or not?"

"Ah, you may well start," Harold exclaimed, as he watched his cousin. "Now just read through those papers. It won't take you more than half an hour, and then tell me what you think."

As he spoke he sat down with a listless air in an arm-chair, and gazed moodily into the fire. Ralph Seton began to read without speaking, and for something more than half an hour the two men sat there, in a silence entirely unbroken by any sound save the occasional fall of a coal from the grate, or the rustle of the papers as Ralph turned over the sheets. He read rapidly, but carefully, and gradually his face assumed an expression of perplexed and anxious thought; but he never once raised his eyes from the papers before him, his whole thoughts apparently too closely concentrated on his task to allow him even to remember the presence of his cousin. At last he came to the end, and as he laid the papers down, Harold looked up at him, and their eyes met. Still Ralph did not speak.

"Well, what do you say?" Harold asked, after they had looked at one another in silence for a moment.

"Nothing at present. You must give me time to think."

"Oh yes, think away. I've thought till my head ached, without much satisfaction."

Ralph made no answer, but leaning back in his chair rested his head upon his hand, with deep lines gathering over his forehead, and the same anxious, perplexed expression on his face as had come over it while he read the papers.



CHAPTER IV.

A TANGLED SKEIN.

It was long before Ralph Seton moved. Once or twice Harold looked at him, but he did not speak. At last Ralph raised himself in his chair, and laying his hand on the papers, said,—

“It is the most extraordinary case I ever came across.”

“Is that all you have discovered?” Harold asked. I should have thought a very few moments might have enabled you to arrive at that conclusion.”

“You are not a lawyer. But it is not the only conclusion at which I have arrived.”

“I should hope not. I want to know your opinion. Your legal head will probably have taken in all the bearings of the case much more rapidly than mine.”

“I am not prepared to give one. I must have more time for consideration before I do that. The conclusion which I meant was simply that I am the last man in the world to whom you ought to have shown those papers. What induced you to bring them to me?”

“Why should I not?”

“Why should you not? Harold! you are looking at the subject only from your own point of view. Can't you see that this is, for me, a most awkward subject on which to give any opinion?”

“Ralph,” Harold quietly answered, “you have always been more like an elder brother to me than anything else. Is the first result of the discovery of those wretched papers

to be to dissolve that tie in feeling, as well as to throw a doubt on our relationship in fact, and force us to act in the guarded way men act who are at enmity with each other?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Ralph, energetically, "but you must see how painful the position is in which I am placed."

"At any rate, you have the satisfaction of knowing you are not an impostor," replied Harold, bitterly; "and at this moment I believe I am disposed to regard that certainty as the height of human felicity. What is the pain of your position compared to mine? There is a fair prospect before me of as utter a shipwreck of all my hopes in life as ever befell mortal man; and with that in view I will at least hold fast to the only thing I can save amid the ruin; the power to act in such a way that there shall be no part of my conduct which will not bear to be tested by the highest rules of honour and good faith. I will not take one step in this wretched business without your knowledge and full approbation."

"Harold, you are a noble fellow."

"Don't talk rubbish. It's rather a satire on current morality that a man should be considered a saint because he can resolve to act honestly when his own worldly interests might be advanced by his turning scoundrel. But a truce to all this. Tell me what is to be done."

"I can't yet: I must have more time to think. Nor are you fit for any such discussion now," Ralph added, as he glanced at the haggard face of his cousin, which strangely belied the almost cold calmness of his manner and quiet business-like tone. "Where are you staying?"

"I only came up to-day."

"It is too late to have a bed got ready for you here, and for the moment, I had rather no one knew you were here. This matter must be kept very close, Harold. Find yourself a lodging, and come to me at my chambers to-morrow

evening. By that time I'll be prepared to give you some opinion on this strange case, and consult with you over what course we shall pursue."

Harold left, and Ralph Seton went off to his bed, with about perhaps as small a prospect of sleeping as ever man had in this world. Though with lawyer-like caution he had refused to commit himself to an opinion until he had had more time to go over the whole case, he had a pretty shrewd conviction that he was already fairly master of it; and never in the whole course of his professional career had it fallen to his lot to try and see his way through such an intricate and apparently hopeless entanglement.

The case, in brief, was this. The woman to whose care Harold had, at three weeks old, been confided, was one over whom there hung some mystery. She was married to a man who had been butler at Rookwood in the time of Sir Myles' father, and who bore no very high character. He had been pensioned off, no one knew exactly why, and lived at a cottage not very far from the house. The woman was suspected of being partly if not wholly a gipsy, and certainly her relations to Sir Myles himself were by no means clear. It had always been said that a quarrel with his father had been the cause of his entering the army and going to India, and more than once a suggestion had been made in the neighbourhood that this woman had something to do with it. No one, however, had anything to say against her. The retired cottage where she lived had been suddenly and rapidly fitted up, just about the time when Sir Myles, then Captain Seton, went out to India. The butler had left Rookwood for a few days, returned with her as his wife, and taken up his abode there. She held herself aloof from every one, and rarely or never left her cottage. What sort of terms she was on with her husband no one knew; he did not appear to be very often at home, but no one ever heard of any disagreement between them. The only

living creature for whom the silent mistress of the cottage seemed to have any affection was a little fair-haired child, an orphan niece of her husband's, who lived with her, and to whom she was devoted. In due course of time the child grew up into an extremely pretty girl; went out to service as a lady's-maid; came home occasionally to see her adopted mother, and turn all the village heads; and finally went off with her mistress to live in Paris, where her uncle was wont to boast she had made a capital marriage, having become the wife of a prosperous hotel-keeper, who was rapidly making a great fortune.

People said it was not hard to account for the strong mutual dislike of Lady Seton and Mrs. Mayne. Before Lady Seton's arrival Mrs. Mayne had been in the habit of going to Rookwood sometimes; afterwards she never set foot in the house. Nevertheless, she received little Harold, when confided to her charge, kindly enough, and, after a while, seemed really to grow sufficiently fond of him to grieve sincerely when he was taken away from her, and to attempt to draw him to her cottage as often as possible,—an attempt which Lady Seton spared no pains to thwart in every way in her power as long as she remained at Rookwood.

Of all this Ralph Seton had been aware before. He had often been at Rookwood during the five years Lady Seton had lived there, after her return from abroad, and knew a good deal of all that had passed; but he had never deemed it of the least consequence, until the papers Harold had found placed the whole subject in a very different light. From them he learned the grave importance of every trifle, however slight, which was in any way connected with those five years during which Mrs. Mayne had had the charge of Harold Seton. She had become a widow very shortly after Harold was placed under her care, and had seemed to grow then even more silent and reserved in her habits than she had been before.

Sir Myles Seton had been a man of considerable ability, and though the papers consisted of little more than rough notes and memoranda, written down at various times, they were arranged in a clear and business-like way, which rendered it easy enough for Ralph Seton to master their contents, and arrange the whole in a distinct and connected story. It appeared that about five years after Lady Seton left Rookwood, Sir Myles had gone abroad, and while in Switzerland had received an imploring message from Mrs. Mayne, entreating him to come to her directly, as she was dying and must see him. Sir Myles had obeyed the summons, with suspicious alacrity Ralph thought, as he made a note of the dates, considering that his uncle was not a man given, in general, to much consideration for other people's feelings and wishes. Nor did he seem, in the present instance, to have derived much satisfaction from his unwonted amiability. "Heaven knows," he wrote, "it would have been better, unless I had received the message earlier, that I had paid no attention to it." It was little wonder he said so. Mrs. Mayne had been too near death, by the time he arrived, to let her make it clear what had been the object of her request. There had been moments of consciousness, when she had recognised him, and striven hard to speak; but her mind had wandered incessantly, and no effort of Sir Myles had enabled him to draw from the dying woman anything like a connected account of what was weighing on her mind. When at last she had become entirely insensible, he had gained nothing but a horrible suspicion of the possibility that Harold was not his son.

He had at once made rough notes of all Mrs. Mayne had said, as far as he could carry in his head her confused ramblings, and endeavoured to work out of the whole some connected thread, but it had been in vain. After many hours' work, aided by the clue supplied to him by his

knowledge of the past, he had been able to arrive at nothing but the conviction that he had before him two positions from which to choose ; either that his own son had died in infancy, and Mrs. Mayne had taken advantage of the trust confided to her to substitute an impostor in his place,—or, that she had meditated such an act as a piece of vengeance only too well merited, and had brooded over it in her loneliness, until she had at last, when her mind was weakened by illness, believed herself that she had done it. Which was the more probable hypothesis of the two, Sir Myles had been utterly unable to decide. Truth and falsehood seemed to have been mixed up in the brain of the unhappy woman in such confusion that the entanglement was as hopeless as it was painful. Most devoutly Sir Myles appeared to have wished that he had either heard more or nothing at all. He had hoped to find some clue among Mrs. Mayne's possessions, and had himself, made, immediately after her death, a most careful investigation of all her papers. But it had been useless ; there was nothing to afford the faintest trace.

Sir Myles, however, had not been disposed to let the matter rest there. He could not bring himself to believe such a transaction could have taken place without leaving some trace. He had arranged some plausible story to conceal his real motives, and had instituted a minute investigation into every circumstance connected with Mrs. Mayne during the five years she had had charge of Harold. He had found, as any one would find, under the circumstances, that to gain any reliable information about events ten years after their occurrence, and when all those most immediately connected with them are dead, is no easy task. A great deal he had ascertained calculated to increase his uneasiness, but not to afford him any satisfaction. All the idle talk his inquiries raised seemed only to complicate the case. There had been strange doings at Mrs. Mayne's

cottage, and scandal was rife ; but what one was ready to swear, another was equally ready to deny on oath, and it was all ten years ago. There had been one point which had instantly struck Sir Myles as of importance. He could gain no information as to what had become of Mayne's niece, the reputed wife of the wealthy Paris hotel-keeper. There was a rumour, or rather there had been one at the time, that she had been seen about the cottage when Harold was an infant ; but it was all vague and uncertain. Still Sir Myles had thought he was on the track then. If he could only find this woman, he might succeed in procuring some information of importance. If such a crime had been committed, it was more than probable she was either an accomplice, or knew something about it. It was easy enough to produce a satisfactory reason for a rigid inquiry as to what had become of her : some property belonging to her uncle was a fair excuse ; and, under this plea, Sir Myles had openly advertised, and used every possible means to discover what had become of her. It was all in vain, however ; and though more than ever convinced, by the fact of her having so entirely disappeared, of the importance of finding her, he had at last given up the attempt in despair. Sir Myles's notes and memoranda referred to all that had passed during this time. With a precision and clearness which, under the circumstances, spoke more for his head than his heart, he had written down everything he had ascertained, and all the gossip and scandal he had heard, in opposite columns, according as it seemed to stand for or against the probability of Harold really being his own son, and had at last arrived at the conclusion that it was a hopeless mystery, the solution of which he could never expect to obtain ; and that, therefore, things must rest as they stood.

The papers were a cold, clear statement of facts, and were evidently intended solely for his own guidance, at the

time he was making inquiries on the subject. If he had read aright the lesson, as his own sins came back so suddenly on his head, he left no record of the bitter teaching.

This was the tangled skein suddenly laid before Ralph Seton for consideration, and small wonder was it if, as one after another the difficulties and now endlessly increased intricacies of the case rose up before him, he almost shrank from contemplating it at all. Again and again, however, he went over the papers, making notes for his own guidance, and carefully comparing and scrutinizing each sentence. At last, with almost an angry exclamation, he threw them into a safe at his chambers, and went home to dinner.

He was back at his chambers by the time he had arranged with his cousin to meet him ; but Harold was there before him, with a haggard, wan look on his face, which went to Ralph's heart.

"Harold, old fellow," he said, "don't look so awfully downcast ; we may get clear yet."

It was a feeble attempt at consolation, but the best, under the circumstances, which Ralph could offer. Harold looked up at him with a strange, half-sad, half-bitter look.

"How would you feel, if, every time a man addressed you by name, you had a reminder that perhaps you were an impostor ?"

He had always had a blunt, straightforward way of putting things, which was sometimes very perplexing to people's conventional ideas. Ralph felt it particularly so at the present moment.

"You take a strange, cold, hard view of the subject," he said ; "almost——"

He stopped abruptly, checked by one of the many complications of the case. "Almost as hard and practical a one as your father seems to have taken," he had been going to say.

“Almost what?”

“Almost as if you had made up your mind to regard a mere doubt as a proved fact, and accept the position with as good a grace as possible.”

“God knows, Ralph, I'd wear a happier face then,” he exclaimed, passionately. “I don't mean to say it would be pleasant to be robbed in a single moment,—no, not robbed, despoiled, I should say, of name, family, everything in the world; but I don't think it would be so hard to bear as this torturing uncertainty. It's very well to say I seem cold and hard about it, but the truth is just this, I dare not admit, even to myself, that I have any feelings. When a man is face to face with a painful and difficult position, where he has to think and to act, the less he lets his feelings have play until the necessity for action is over, the better for him. God helping me, I will act now as a good and honourable man should act, but if I began to think about feelings I should sink altogether.”

“Then let's look at the subject in a calm, business-like way,” replied Ralph quietly, catching, with quick tact, the exact tone of his cousin's feelings.

“Ay, do, there's a good fellow.”

“Well, all I can say is this: the oftener I go over those papers the more thoroughly do I agree with my uncle's own decision, that it is a hopeless entanglement. Whether you are at this moment Seton of Rookwood, or whether I am, is an inscrutable mystery. Harold,” he added, suddenly, “can you throw no light upon the question?”

“How?”

“Can you remember nothing in your early childhood which might give a clue?”

“No, I can't, Ralph; I have tried, but tried in vain. I remember very little of my life at the cottage. I was but five years old when I left it, you know. I suspect, by the

little recollection I have of it at all, it must have been entirely devoid of incident. I fancy Mrs. Mayne was very kind to me; I do remember being in an awful way when I was taken away to Rookwood——”

He stopped rather abruptly.

“What are we to do, Ralph?” he asked.

“Well, the first step to me is clear enough, if only you agree to it.”

“What is it?”

“Why, you see, this is a painful question for either of us to decide upon. The case ought to be laid before some one able to give an opinion from an entirely disinterested point of view.”

“Ralph, you don’t mean a lawsuit?”

“Nothing of the kind. The whole thing must be kept as close as possible. That is a most important point; don’t lose sight of it for a moment.”

“I don’t think I’m likely to talk about it,” Harold answered, rather shortly.

“I never supposed you were; though I doubt whether you see the full reason for silence.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“Well, my dear fellow, it is just this. Supposing, for a moment, that you are not Sir Myles Seton’s son, we can still produce no positive proof that he does not exist somewhere. Did any hint of the difficulty get wind, you may depend half a dozen claimants would spring up in a moment, and you might find yourself involved in a ruinous suit before you knew where you were.”

A fresh complication this to poor Harold Seton.

“I never thought of that, Ralph.”

“Don’t think of it now, save as a reason for proceeding cautiously. What I want is simply that you should let me quietly submit these papers to legal consideration; we are neither in a position to judge clearly. Let us have a sound

legal opinion on the case, as the first step towards deciding what is to be done. Are you willing ?”

“Do what you like ; I leave it entirely in your hands.”

“And they are just the hands in which it ought not to be. However, you must have your own way. In the meantime go back to Rookwood, and act just as you would have done had you never found these papers.”

“I can't do that, Ralph.”

“Harold, you must,” replied his cousin, gravely. “Fairly, I tell you, you are in danger of carrying your honourable scruples to the verge of Quixotism. You have no right to exaggerate a possibility into a certainty, and then act upon it ; and if you do, you will only increase the endless difficulties of the case. Surely, too, as far as this particular point goes, if I am satisfied that is enough.”

“I dare say you are right, but——”

“But you don't like it, I know that ; but do it you must. You must be reasonable, old fellow. Quixotism is always the danger of highly honourable dispositions like yours, but remember there are few evils worse than virtues run mad. Don't brood yourself into a positive conviction you are an impostor, and then turn fanatic. If you do, I declare I see no possibility of ever getting out of this mess.”

“Very well, I'll do as you wish.”

“That's a sensible fellow. Go down at once and keep everything going. I dare say it will be a week or two before I shall have an answer about this ; then I'll write to you to come, and we can decide on our next step.”

With this arrangement they parted, and Harold Seton returned to Rookwood the following day.

It was a strange position, that in which they stood. Had such an one been laid before Ralph Seton three days before, as a case for abstract consideration, he would have declared it absolutely impossible that any two men could act as he and Harold Seton were acting at that moment.

But he had learned a lesson, and that lesson amounted pretty nearly to this, that when perfect sincerity and integrity of purpose come into play, many things become possible which are, under ordinary circumstances, impossible, and on which no man, with a fair knowledge of the world, could ever securely count. Many a time did Ralph Seton repeat to himself, as he thought over it all, "He's a noble fellow."



CHAPTER V.

TRYING TO UNRAVEL IT.

NEARLY a fortnight passed after Harold Seton's arrival at Rookwood, before he received his cousin's summons to return to London. It was a dreary fortnight to him. He had plenty of work to occupy him, but his was hardly at the moment a case for hard work to remedy. The terrible uncertainty of his position formed its chief wretchedness for him. He was thinking for ever, and for ever thinking to no purpose; endlessly trying, in fact, to shape the future according to a past of which he had no certain knowledge. So bitterly did he feel the position, that at times he almost felt as if he could have actually welcomed the intelligence that some discovery had been made, which confirmed the worst suspicions aroused by the papers, because it would have ended at once the painful suspense, and enabled him to decide on some course of action. It was not a wasted fortnight however. No discipline ever is which teaches a man to endure steadily and calmly, even when the relief of action is denied to him.

Ralph's summons to him to return to London and hear counsel's opinion was a boon. It seemed as if even that was something tangible to grasp. Some such feeling he expressed to his cousin.

"I fear you must not build much on that. Beyond the bare satisfaction of having the opinion of competent and disinterested judges, I fear we have not gained much."

"What is the opinion?"

"Just what we had reached ourselves. It is a hopeless entanglement. Two of the clearest-headed fellows at the bar have gone over the case most carefully. They both agree on the subject. There is no ground for decision. Where one fact points in one direction, another seems to point equally strongly in the opposite. They say even were we disposed to try an amicable lawsuit, they could not recommend such a course. There is no evidence on which a jury could decide; and the only probable result of rendering the case public would be to raise a host of claimants, and trebly complicate the whole affair. All they can advise is, that we try to obtain further information."

"A valuable piece of advice."

"The only piece possible, however. I can't say I feel very sanguine. In such cases every year that passes increases the difficulty. Still we can but try. What was the name of that woman, Harold? Mayne's niece. I mean her married name."

"I haven't the least idea."

"Then we must try for her as Susan Mayne. If we could only succeed in bringing her to light, we might have a chance of finding out something. Her disappearance looks strange."

"And bears against me," Harold said.

"I think it does; but it is the only point that does. Remember, Harold, I am taking you at your word, and treating this as a mere matter of business."

"Keep to that," Harold replied, energetically. "It's a positive relief to me to see some possibility of action. That woman must be sought abroad as well as here. I'm pretty well at home all over the continent. You look after the search in England, Ralph. I'll see to it abroad. Only, mind, spare no expense. If the truth is to be ascertained, let it be done, at all costs."

Within eight-and-forty hours Harold Seton was on his

way to Paris, feeling, by contrast, almost lighthearted in the prospect of some definite occupation for both mind and body ; as long, at least, as he did not think of her whom, after all her mother's love for him, he had, perhaps, no right to call mother.

Ralph Seton set himself to his share of the task with more misgivings, probably, than his cousin, as to the result. He had a strong internal conviction the search would be useless. But what, in that case, would Harold do? Many an hour did Ralph Seton spend pondering over that question and wondering what possible course of action his cousin would find, which might reconcile his keen sense of honour with the position forced upon him.

The result of their search Harold Seton's answer to Padre Felipe has shown. At the end of a year they stood just in the same position as at the beginning. There was nothing even to turn the balance of probabilities. Harold Seton had failed to find the least trace of Susan Mayne. His ignorance of her married name seemed to be a fatal stumbling-block. And Ralph Seton had been equally unsuccessful in England.

"Has everything been tried that could possibly be tried?" Harold drearily asked, as they sat together at the year's end in Ralph Seton's chambers, discussing the subject.

"Everything—at least, in England."

"I can answer for the rest. It's very extraordinary, Ralph,—the most extraordinary part of the whole thing, I think,—that all trace of the transaction has so completely passed away."

"Supposing," answered Ralph, "that there ever was any transaction to leave a trace. I have employed in this business one of the sharpest detectives I ever came across. He is utterly at fault, and says he can only see two possible solutions of the mystery. Either the whole thing is the invention of a diseased brain, or Mrs. Mayne managed the

business entirely alone, without a single accomplice. That, he says, is the only way to account for the absolute impossibility of finding the least clue to guide us. I can see that he inclines himself strongly to the former hypothesis."

"Then he's a fool," was Harold's somewhat uncourteous rejoinder. "Mrs. Mayne was, as you well know, a clever, strong-minded woman. You surely don't expect me to believe that such a woman, when near her end, succeeded in working herself up into so full a belief in a purely imaginary crime, dating full fifteen years before, that she actually sent for Sir Myles to come all that distance in consequence, and through all her wanderings showed so clearly that there was something on her mind? No, no. You may depend the latter hypothesis is the more probable one of the two."

"I can't deny that. Still I don't see the use of discussing the question. It is clear enough we cannot hope for any further light on the subject. There is ground for suspicion, there is nothing more. The whole thing must pass into the ranks of those strange mysteries which will never be cleared up in this world. There are many of them, too,—more than we are inclined to suspect. It seems to me there is but one course you can follow. Burn those papers, and try to forget that you ever saw them."

Ralph Seton spoke quietly, but evidently not without an effort.

"Ralph, would that course satisfy you?" Harold asked. "Answer me that question, on your honour."

Ralph Seton's eyes fell before Harold's keen glance for a moment. Then he answered, firmly enough, "If by satisfying me, you mean satisfying me that all that is fair and just has been done—yes, most emphatically; but if you mean satisfying me as to the actual position of affairs, I can't say yes. If your right had been incontestably proved, no one would have rejoiced more than myself. The Setons never had, and

never will have, a more noble representative ; but we are a proud race, and I am a thorough Seton. Besides, remember, I am a father, Harold. I will not be one whit less truthful than yourself, and I cannot say but that this wretched business will leave me a bitter feeling for the rest of my life."

He spoke rather sadly. It was a hard case for him. He was a Seton, there was no question on that point ; and to live with a doubt in his mind whether the acknowledged head of the family was not, all innocently though it might be, a mere nameless impostor, usurping his own and his children's rights, was a position no man could be expected to receive with other than a bitter feeling ; though at the same he saw it was inevitable.

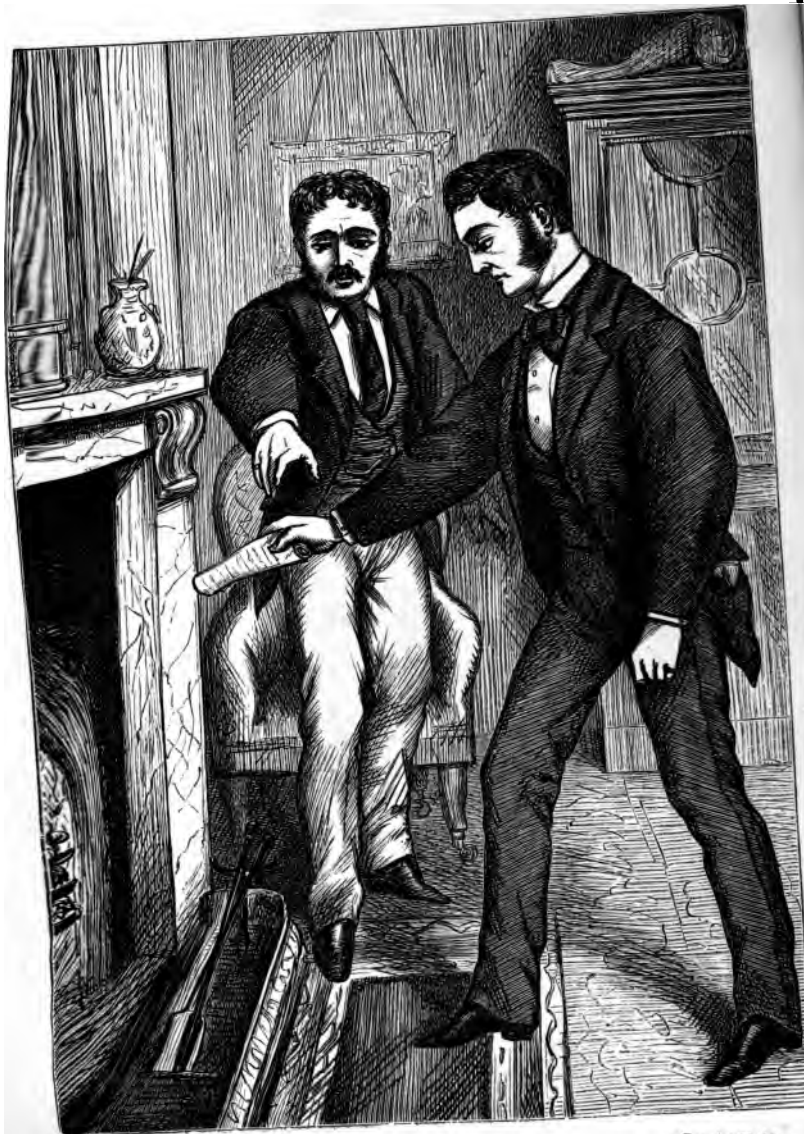
Harold sat silent for a little, as though pondering over his cousin's words. Then he asked—

"And do you expect me to be satisfied with such a course ?"

"No, I don't believe you will for a moment," was Ralph's energetic answer. "There's a thorn planted in both our sides, but I tell you fairly, the position is as inevitable to you as to myself. I don't think you see that there is no other course open to you."

"Is there not ?"

"No, none that I can see. Just consider the case yourself. The property is strictly entailed, therefore you have only a life interest in it. Suppose, for a moment, you were disposed to perpetrate what the world would certainly consider a marvellous piece of Quixotism—to regard the question of your birth as settled against you, and hand over the whole property to me, as the rightful heir ; you could not do it. You have no right to do it. The law would recognise you as Seton of Rookwood, whatever you might choose to do ; and even supposing you could be allowed to sacrifice your own rights, remember you are a very young man,



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and there are your children to be considered. The moment you have a son his rights are equal with your own."

"You see no other course, then?"

"No, none."

"And I am under the necessity," Harold said, in a calm, deliberate tone, "of living the rest of my life in a state of uncertainty whether I am not a wretched impostor, robbing a man who has been like a brother to me of his lawful inheritance and handing on to my children and grandchildren after me possessions to which they have no more right than the merest beggar in the streets. And this is the position forced upon me by the laws of the land. It's not a pleasant one to contemplate, Ralph."

"Some men, many men, in fact, would accommodate themselves to it very easily, Harold. You never will, I know."

Ralph had risen as he spoke, and, unlocking an iron safe, he produced the fatal papers. "These had better be burned at once, Harold," he said, "and I am the proper person to do it, not you."

Harold started up and wrested them from his grasp. "At your peril you do anything of the kind," he exclaimed. "I would certainly rather leave them with you than keep them myself; but not one moment longer shall you have them unless you pledge me your word you will guard them as carefully as you would the title-deeds of the property."

Ralph looked at him in silent astonishment.

"Ay! you may look astonished," Harold continued; "but we are not quite at the end of the business yet. I have never said what I intend to do."

"There is nothing for you to say."

"Yes, there is. There is a course, Ralph, which has, I dare say, never crossed your thoughts, whereby this wretched uncertainty may be rendered ultimately of little consequence."

"I don't see it."

"I do."

A heavy cloud seemed settling down over his face as he spoke, and he rested his head upon his hand. Ralph waited in silence for some further explanation. At last Harold raised his head, and spoke in a low tone.

"Look here, Ralph. I do see, and have for some months seen, that there is a course open before me by which your rights and mine may be in a great measure reconciled. God forgive me, but I have tried to turn away from it. I'm not a saint, raised to such sublime heights of enthusiasm as to be able to walk over red-hot ploughshares without wincing. Still, I know it is the right course. Let things stay as they are for a time, say, for another year. It's one thing to know a course of action is the right one; another to resolve to follow it. This is all very incomprehensible to you, I know. I'm not going to explain now, though. I'm going abroad for a year. I'll have everything in train for you to manage the property during my absence. At the end of a year I'll come back, and tell you what I mean."

"What on earth can he be meditating?" Ralph Seton pondered, after his cousin had left him. "I was certain he would never consent to the position; but what can he intend?"

He wondered in vain. Ralph Seton was an honourable, upright man; but it needed a stronger light than such feelings can supply to enable him even to see the path which Harold saw, with daily increasing distinctness; without any consideration of whether his cousin would have the courage to enter voluntarily upon such a path.

CHAPTER VI.

COUNTING THE COST.

WHEN first the discovery of the strange and painful position in which he stood had burst upon Harold Seton, he was too much bewildered by the shock to see anything clearly, and his thoughts were chiefly centred upon the hope of discovering something which might bring the truth to light. That hope had grown gradually more and more faint all through the year that he had spent in vainly seeking some trace of Susan Mayne ; and as it decreased, his thoughts began to turn more constantly to the consideration of what his own future course was to be. He had clearly seen, all along, the legal difficulties which Ralph Seton had pointed out, in the way of his doing anything save accept his position and make the best of it. Yet that position was to him intolerable, even in contemplation. There is no tone of self-respect so high, no sense of honour so keen, as that of a woman of the superior order, both morally and intellectually,—such a woman as Lady Seton had been. Harold Seton knew his own tone of feeling in these respects was much above the average ; he had always believed it an inheritance—now he laid it, with a sharp pang, to his early training. But whatever its cause, he was perfectly conscious that it rendered the apparently inevitable future insupportable to him.

It was while painfully reflecting upon this, that the idea suddenly presented itself of the only means whereby his enforced position might be rendered tolerable ; and yet in

with it seemed, for the moment, as if the remedy was worse than the disease. In the dark and gloomy prospect it opened before him. He could not shake off the cruel necessity for holding while he lived rights to which he had perhaps no claim; but if the evil went no further than that, it was comparatively a slight one. It was in his own power to prevent it going further. Let him only resolve to live and die a lonely man, and the evil was at an end. If Ralph Seton or his eldest son succeeded himself, whether he was or was not the son of Sir Myles Seton, the property equally went to the rightful heir. Not so if he left it to a son of his own. Then the uncertainty, of little consequence in the other case, became of vital importance. It was, in theory, a clear and simple solution of the difficulty; but how in practice? That was a question which, when first the idea presented itself to his mind, Harold Seton did not dare to ask himself.

This was the course from which, he admitted to his cousin, he had tried to turn away, even while he knew it was the right path; and it was with the full consciousness that as yet he dared not pledge himself to tread it that he had claimed a year, and fled. A year was not long for such a consideration: not long to form the resolution to give up all his hopes in this world, all those prospects which had been so brilliant: to conquer the rebellious thoughts and feelings which clamoured for a hearing, and to determine to act as a man should act in such a case, standing alone for judgment at the bar of his God and his own conscience. He felt as if it was only alone, and away from every place which could even bring him under the influence of memory and association, he could really calmly contemplate his future career.

It was rather a hard matter for Harold Seton to find the scenes he wanted,—places entirely new. It seemed to him as if almost every place he could think of was either known

to him or connected in some way with the life he would fain forget while he contemplated the life to come.

Then he thought of the south of Spain. He had been often, as a boy, in various parts of the country, but never on the southern coast. He would be pretty safe there from tourists and guide-books, and might spend his time as he pleased, undisturbed by any reminders of every-day life.

In wandering about the south coast of Spain he spent many months, an object of much curiosity and no little interest. Who could the handsome English señor be, and what could he want there, seeming to have nothing to do, and to take pleasure in doing it? His knowledge of Spanish made him thoroughly at home where he chose to be, but he did not seem inclined to make much use of it. To be alone and idle seemed all for which he cared.

Was he idle? It was natural enough those who saw him should think so. Nine-tenths of the world would have called him the same; but it was a very pregnant idleness. One hears often enough of people being very busy doing nothing; in fact, nothing is probably the general result of the labours of people who are always very busy. But there is no converse term to describe that fruitful inaction which is the exact opposite of busy idleness. Perhaps because it is a state known only to a class who do not care to describe it.

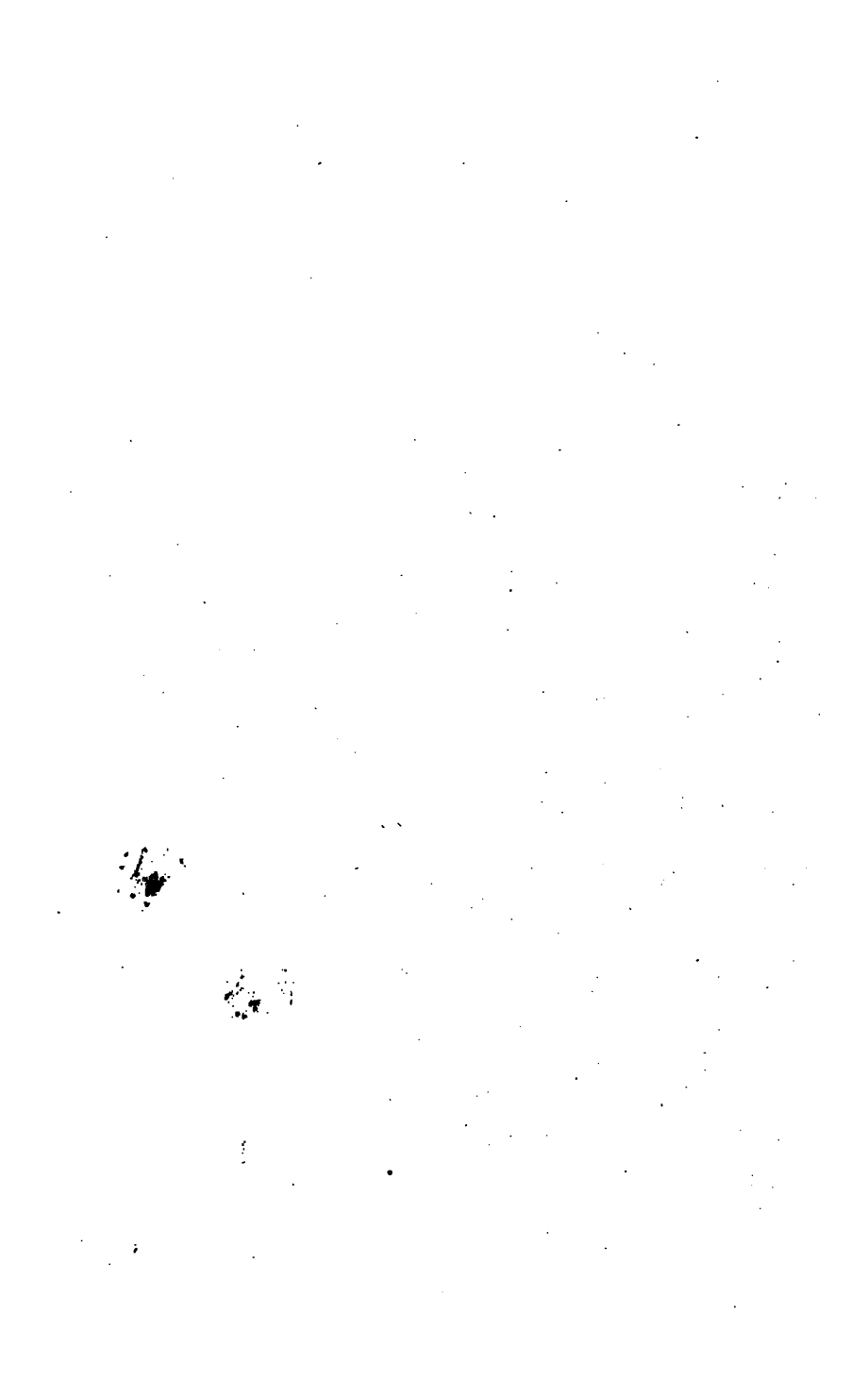
Through all that time Harold Seton was slowly, oftentimes painfully, working out the problem of his own position, and seeing the inevitable future shaping itself more clearly and distinctly day by day. When first the course over which he was now pondering had occurred to him, he had regarded it as a voluntary act on his own part; and perhaps, for Harold Seton was not without the deep underlying vein of romance which is inherent in all characters not utterly commonplace, a little of the soft glowing halo of self-sacrifice had lingered round the voluntary relinquishing of all his hopes to a sense of honour. Now, however, as he tried

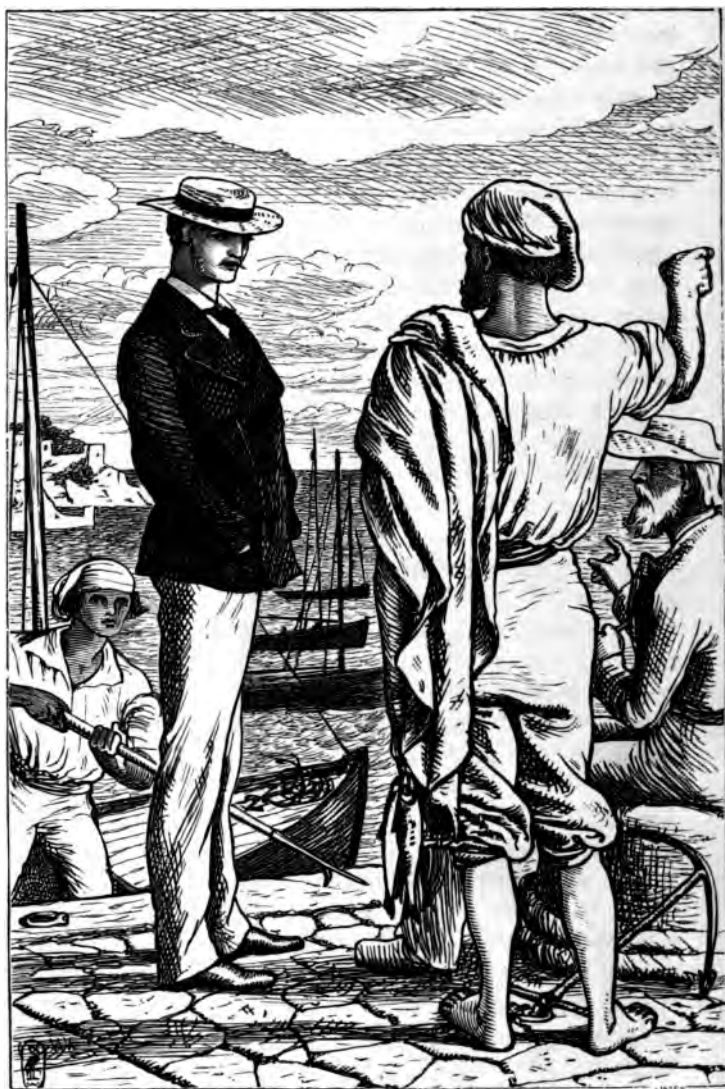
calmly to realize his own position, it began to dawn upon him that the course he meditated was inevitable; at least, to a man not prepared deliberately to reject the course his conscience told him was the only right one for him to follow.

Look at the subject from what point he might, the conclusion was still the same,—that he must stand alone, and bear unaided the burden of a false position and cruel uncertainty. The absolute necessity that he should never have a son rendered it worse than useless to consider any of the other bearings of the case. The more he thought of it the more clearly did he see that, for him at least, it was a simple question of right and wrong; and, to say the truth, with the strange inconsistency of human nature, the sacrifice, when it stood before him as a simple moral necessity, seemed harder to make than it had while he regarded it as a voluntary action.

Then there arose within him a great clamour, and a long, sore struggle,—such a struggle as may not be described in words. Many a man leads, voluntarily, as lonely a life as Harold Seton saw before him, and never seeks to form domestic ties, but all men are not of the same temperament; besides, doing a thing voluntarily is a very different thing from doing it of necessity. Very few of those who lead such lives deliberately resolve on doing so at twenty-four. Circumstances have more to do with their actions than will. They count the prize within their grasp whenever they choose to take it; and it has probably lost its value before they ever fairly realize that it is not for them.

The necessity came upon Harold Seton with its full weight, and for a time he gave way before it. He had never given much thought in his life to domestic ties; visions of fame had had more place in his day-dreams than visions of love; but now the relative value of things in his estimation began to alter strangely, and in some of these





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lonely hours he swayed fearfully between right and wrong, and strove to see things in a false light,—sometimes succeeding for a time in blinding himself to the truth, only to feel more wretched than when he boldly faced it.

It was while thus tempest-tost and sorely tried, that—by a special interposition of Providence, he would have said afterwards—he came across Padre Felipe. He had fixed his head-quarters at a small town on the coast, not very far from the monastery, and had, in some of his wanderings by sea and land, penetrated into the bay, and been strangely taken by its peaceful seclusion. This was in the early spring, some months before the conversation recorded in the first chapter, and he had visited the bay more than once without coming into contact with any of the inhabitants of the monastery. Except to visit the sick or the afflicted, the fathers never left their own grounds.

It happened one day that Harold Seton, worn out with a night of restless self-communing, was seized with a fancy to go out to sea for a few hours. It was a clear, bright day, with a strong breeze, and he felt as if the mere motion of the boat, dancing over the waves, would be a relief. The boatmen shook their heads.

“Does the señor know the signs of the weather?” asked an old man among them.

“Not very well,” Harold said. “There’s a fair breeze, I see, but nothing to speak of. I am not going far.”

“But does the señor see those clouds? They portend sudden squalls here. It is not safe.”

“So much the better,” exclaimed Harold, with a momentary rush of bitter feeling. “I don’t want any one to go with me.”

In a few moments he was on the water. There was never, perhaps, an Englishman yet who did not feel some satisfaction in knowing he was risking his life; and to Harold Seton the knowledge, at that moment, of a certain

amount of danger was an untold relief. He was not, however, disposed to carry his rashness to its utmost limits; and had made up his mind to return, when, on looking behind him, he saw his peril. A sudden squall, such as the old boatman had predicted, was sweeping over the sea towards him. He had barely time to prepare before it struck the boat with a force which sent her flying through the water. A few moments after, the unpleasant conviction forced itself upon Harold that she had sprung a leak. It was but a trifling one; still, in such a sea, he knew it rendered it useless for him to attempt to reach the port. There was nothing for it but to run for shore. He was nearly opposite the bay, and remembering the smooth strip of sand below the monastery, he made straight for that. It was an exciting race. The leak increased faster than he had anticipated, and before he reached the land there was water enough in the boat to make her labour heavily. He was within a few yards of the sand, however, and congratulating himself on his success, when he heard a warning shout from the shore. The words were lost in the noise of wind and water, but in another moment the boat struck on a sunken rock, just beyond the sand; then a huge master-wave, rolling heavily in, caught her, turned her over like a nutshell, and rolled Harold Seton upon the beach, almost to the feet of a monk who was standing there.

It had all been so sudden that Harold was on his feet, coughing and choking with the salt water he had swallowed, before he had time to realize what had happened. The monk looked at him half doubtfully, as if not certain how to address him.

"The señor is English, is he not?" he said at last. "Unfortunately, I cannot speak that language. French or Italian?" he added, interrogatively.

Harold contrived to gasp out an answer in Spanish. The monk looked surprised.

"Few of your countrymen speak Spanish," he said. "I never thought of putting that question to you."

"Have you known many of my countrymen?"

"I have known many of all nations. But," he added, with a smile, "I did not come down to tell you that while you stand shivering to listen. I came to bear you a message from the prior. We saw you making for the bay, and knew you must be drenched, and the prior hopes you will accept what poor hospitality our house can afford, for as long as is agreeable to you. We did not anticipate so alarming an accident," he added, courteously, "or I should have brought down more assistance. You have had a narrow escape."

"How so?" Harold hardly understood; the danger had not seemed to him very great.

"A few yards more to the right," replied the monk, "and you could hardly have reached the shore without at least serious injury. The boat would have struck further out to sea, and you would have been thrown among the rocks instead of on the sand. You would have been stunned, and possibly drowned before you could have been rescued." He muttered a few words in a low tone, and crossed himself, as if offering a thanksgiving for Harold's escape.

Perhaps, under other circumstances, a momentary wish that it had been so might have crossed Harold's mind. But, strange and complicated being as man is, there is always a most unromantically strong animal element about him. And when he is drenched to the skin, and shivering in a cold wind, I doubt whether his thoughts ever soar much beyond the creature comforts of a blazing fire and dry clothes. Certainly, in spite of all the strange mysterious romance which was colouring his life in such sombre hues at the moment, Harold Seton's did not; so probably the thought of having ended the struggle, almost at its

commencement, in that lonely Spanish bay, never crossed his mind.

Padre Felipe—for it was he who had met Harold, or rather to whose feet he had rolled—had been occupied, while he spoke, in collecting a flask and one or two other things the waves had washed ashore; but he caught the shiver which was Harold's only answer to his remarks.

"Let us go up to the monastery at once," he said. "You are very cold. We must find you some clothes until your own can be sent for."

He led the way in silence. In truth, Harold would have found it hard to speak. His teeth were chattering to an extent which made him glad to keep them tightly clenched, and not a word was spoken as they ascended the steep path to the monastery.

The prior himself met his dripping guest on the terrace, and with many expressions of pleasure at finding they could communicate with each other without the irksome necessity of an interpreter, cordially welcomed him to the monastery.

"I can hardly say I fear you are very wet," he said, with a smile. "I am thankful you are nothing worse. Blessed be the holy Virgin that you have escaped uninjured. Now we must find you dry clothes and food. The latter is easy, but the former—brother," and he turned to Padre Felipe, "how is that to be managed? The señor will hardly feel at home in the frock and cowl of a monk."

"Pedro will bring the señor his Sunday suit, father; I think he could wear it; and in the meantime we could, perhaps, send for some of the señor's own things."

"That is a good thought, brother. Send to the gardens for Pedro, and let him go at once. The señor will give an order for what he wants."

Harold smiled at the quiet way in which the prior, accus-

tomed to unlimited rule in his own little world, was settling everything for him.

“I cannot let you take so much trouble,” he interposed. “My own clothes will dry in an hour or two, and then I can put them on again, to return to my lodgings.”

“That is not to be thought of,” exclaimed the prior. “It will be long before your clothes are thoroughly dry; and besides, you must not dream of leaving the monastery to-night. One wetting in a day is quite enough, and the weather promises to be very stormy to-night.—Send for Pedro, brother.”

Harold yielded, and in the course of another hour made his appearance in the refectory, arrayed in the Sunday finery of the monastery gardener.

“A marvellous fit, my son,” the prior said, with a smile, as he motioned Harold to a seat by his side. “May we be as successful in feeding as we have been in clothing you! You must be very hungry.”

Harold was very hungry, and not a little amused at the novelty of his position. The prior was not over-strict in his conventual rule, so he found it far from uncomfortable. By the time he retired for the night he felt as much at home as if he had known the fathers for years.

The next day was clear and bright, and then Harold expressed some intention of returning to his lodgings.

“Are you entirely alone?” asked the prior.

“Entirely.”

“Then why leave us? We can surely hope to make you as comfortable as you can be in the town under those circumstances. It is not often we have a guest, and it is a pleasure we would fain enjoy a little longer. We have a boat, and game is plentiful in the neighbourhood; so what amusement you can find in fishing and shooting we can easily provide you with.”

Harold willingly acceded to the proposal, and took up

his quarters at the monastery as a guest for an indefinite period ; spending his time just as he pleased, sometimes fishing, sometimes shooting ; oftener dreaming the hours away among the rocks in the bay.

He watched with no slight interest the new phase of existence opened before him, and soon reached some trenchant conclusions on the subject of monastic life.

The prior himself was a jovial, good-natured man, with more of the flesh than the spirit about him, and finding, in the narrow circle of interests afforded him by the general superintendence of the affairs of the monastery, quite enough mental occupation to satisfy his intellectual aspirations. But among the rest of the brotherhood mental idleness had done, or was rapidly doing, its work. They had not even the advantage of the small amount of occupation which fell to the share of the prior ; and they plodded on through the dull daily routine of their aimless life with an apathetic indifference to everything beyond its most trivial details, which spoke loudly enough for the results of that solitude and retirement from all the trials and temptations of the world which is, in theory, so attractive ; at least to that spiritual indolence which, under the assumed garb of superior sanctity, would fain turn its back upon the battle of life,—only to find that man's fiercest conflicts are internal ones ; that he carries with him into his peaceful, holy retirement his own worst enemy ; and that in turning his back upon this naughty world he has relinquished not only its trials and temptations, but many valuable safeguards as well.

Dull stupidity, and an almost childish interest in frivolous pursuits, were the main characteristics of the brotherhood, with here and there the marked contrast of a restless, moody irritability, where some spirit of a less commonplace stamp chafed under its aimless existence, and seemed in a constant state of suppressed turbulence, which a spark might

at any time ignite into a sudden flame of rebellion. But very different from either class was Harold's first acquaintance, Padre Felipe. From the moment of their meeting Harold had felt strongly drawn towards him. Why he could not well have told. Who can ever account for those strange spiritual affinities? They are to be felt, not defined. In truth, although spurious imitations have somewhat brought them into disrepute, even those who most loudly profess disbelief in them are more or less under their influence.

Whether by accident or design Harold did not know, but he and Padre Felipe were much together. The library of the monastery, a place but little frequented by the majority of the monks, was Padre Felipe's favourite resort, but Harold's society had always power to draw him away from thence. It seemed like new life to the monk to come into contact with ideas fresh from the outer world, and many a long hour they spent pacing up and down the sand, in deep discussion of men and things unheard of by any of the other inmates of the convent.

Daily Harold became more conscious of the ascendancy Padre Felipe was gaining over him. No word of inquiry into the circumstances of his life had ever passed the monk's lips; his high-bred courtesy would never have allowed him to seek an unoffered confidence; but Harold was none the less conscious that the keen eye of the father had detected some heavy cloud resting upon him; and with that consciousness had come, as by intuition, a perception of the cause of the influence the monk was acquiring over himself. There were evident traces, both in his lined face and that peculiar calm repose of manner which belongs alone to those who have suffered severely, that he had had deep experience of the storms of life. His ascendancy over Harold was not that of a strong mind over a weak one; it was that of a veteran over a novice, in the fight, which he himself had fought and won.

The difference in their respective creeds formed no barrier between them. Both were catholic and cosmopolitan, men who in both their religious and intellectual training had been kept free from the narrowing influence of that sectarian spirit which makes such sad havoc amongst us in these days of much speaking and little hearing. As far as having firm and even strong opinions on many of the dogmas of the Romish faith went, Harold Seton was a staunch Protestant: but his Protestantism did not extend the length of causing him to feel any alarm, even though he was conscious of a daily increasing respect and affection for a Roman priest. It was the man, not the priest, who held him under his influence, and would have done the same whatever his creed might have been.

They had had more than one discussion over the dogmas of their respective creeds: discussions conducted in the calm, temperate spirit of men really considering what was the truth: not with the intemperate fervour and appalling logic of zealous proselytisers. Harold soon discovered that to many articles of his faith the monk gave a mere passive assent, an assent only maintained by never allowing them to become the subject of any deep consideration. His state was that of many a man in a similar position—his faith was the faith in which he had been trained from infancy; and while he firmly grasped its truths, its errors lay dormant: a state very possible with errors which have been imbibed in infancy: utterly impossible where those errors are the deliberate device of a perverted intellect in later years.

Still, as a rule, they avoided such discussions; choosing rather, as Harold himself expressed it, to remember all that united, and nothing that divided them. But when they did touch on their respective differences, it was done in a spirit of Christian courtesy it were well should be more

frequently recognised as an important feature in religious discussions.

Thus week after week slipped away, and still Harold Seton lingered on at the monastery, learning where he had least expected to learn it, how to find strength for the life before him. His early training had been a religious one. How, in the hands of such a woman as Lady Seton, could it be otherwise? But the seed then sown had laid dormant all these years; exercising, nevertheless, an indirect influence on his thoughts and actions, to an extent of which he was not himself aware; but now it was beginning to stir into a very different sort of life, under the fostering care of a Roman priest. What would the religion be, nurtured under such care? Coloured by the training, perhaps, in a measure; but good, because both seed and soil were good.

Often, in his lonely musings, Harold had reflected, as he said, on what his future career should be, with all the painful doubts and misgivings he so bitterly described; and not seldom with a rebellious clamour against the hard fate laid upon him. Where was the use of wealth, fame, or power to a lonely man? Where was a career of any kind without toil? and how could a man toil, when there was no prize to be obtained by that toil? It all looked very dark. The trial that had fallen upon him was hardly one of a nature to sting a man into active exertion for mere relief. It needs the sharp agony of a deep and sudden wound to do that. The blow that had destroyed his hopes was a heavy, crushing one, which seemed to have bruised and stunned more than to have cut keenly.

It was after a long and gloomy morning's musing on the sea-shore, when the necessity of writing a long business letter to Ralph Seton had seemed to give fresh reality to all which was so dark, that Harold, returning slowly and thoughtfully to the monastery, met Padre Felipe on the

terrace. Padre Felipe had, in truth, been watching him for some time, and anxiously reflecting on whether it would not be well to make some attempt to induce him to speak of whatever was pressing on him so heavily. He had by no means made up his mind on the point, when Harold appeared on the terrace; but his reflections were unnecessary. Harold had often felt inclined to tell him the whole story; the impulse came over him stronger than ever at the moment; and before long Padre Felipe was listening, earnestly and silently, to the strange tale, and speaking to the man who, in spite of their different creeds, was certainly his son in the faith, those words of wise and holy counsel which formed the starting-point of his new life.



CHAPTER VII.

THE LIGHT DAWNS.

IT was well for Harold Seton that he had fallen at that moment under the spiritual guidance of such a man as Padre Felipe. Many a good and wise man, holding a creed far more free from error, would have failed to strike the chord the monk had struck, and would have raised a jarring discord instead of a full harmony.

Alas that it should be so! but sadly few are there, even among those whose special province it is to deal with the diseases of the soul, who have the full knowledge requisite for such a task. Their remedies they study profoundly and carefully; but how many ever study human nature one quarter enough to understand the application of those remedies? In his deep insight into human nature, and quick reading of individual character, lay the secret of the monk's power; and just as the skilled physician suits his treatment to the exact nature of the case before him, had he suited his teaching to the character of the man with whom he had to deal.

Harold Seton had told the whole story so calmly and quietly that it would have puzzled a less keen observer to make out what his feelings on the subject were. Not so the monk. There was a word, or a turn of expression, here and there, which spoke volumes to him; and while he seemed to be only listening with quiet attention, he was weighing carefully the words he should speak. He saw in an instant what his patient needed. Firm, unbending

integrity of purpose was nerving Harold to resolve unflinchingly to act according to the dictates of his own conscience, regardless of what the world might say of such a course, and to submit unresistingly to the will of God. But it was more a cold, clear intellectual submission than one of feeling. The head was less rebellious than the heart. He felt it was a hard fate which had befallen him, though he was strongly determined not to rebel. All this was perfectly clear to Padre Felipe, but there was a great deal more that was clear as well. There were, to his keen eye, abundant indications about Harold Seton of strong passions, and a glowing warmth of temperament beyond what is usual in northern nations, and he knew that such a course as he was trying to mark out for himself would be impossible for him. All those warm feelings were lying dormant as yet ; but unless they were kindled into such life as should strengthen and support him in his career, they would assuredly, sooner or later, wake at another touch, with all the power of a late awakening, and lay the moral and intellectual structure in ruins around them.

It was with the special purpose of thus rousing them that Padre Felipe had so earnestly exhorted Harold to regard the storm which had burst over him as a special call to the service of God. It was the sweep of a master's hand over the chords, and they vibrated under it as they will only vibrate under such a touch. Harold's admission that such a view of his position was new to him spoke but a small part of the truth. The lonely life, which had looked so dark and cold, shone now in a very different light. Hard it might be still, at times, to weak human nature, but it would never be cold and dreary. The mere intellectual submission to the will of God was gone as the light broke in and showed him, in the destruction of his earthly hopes, the call of the Great Master to that baptism of fire which should fit an honoured servant for His own special service ; to that lonely

life which the greatest of His servants had led ; and which, far beyond that, was the nearest which any mortal man could attain to that life which had been His own on earth.

It was with an almost awestruck feeling that Harold Seton paced up and down the sands after that conversation ; while the monk was perhaps offering up, in the monastery chapel, a thanksgiving for the wisdom vouchsafed unto him ; a thanksgiving to the Virgin, it may be, in outward act, while all unconsciously to himself the spirit soared upwards through the mist and darkness of human errors, and rejoiced in the clear light of God's truth. It must have been so, or such a man as Padre Felipe could never have found the peace and comfort he did in those hours of devotion.

As soon as vespers were over he returned to the terrace in search of Harold, but he did not join his walk on the sands. As he marked his look of deep abstraction, he deemed it better to leave him to his own communings ; and leaning against the stem of a vine, with folded arms, he watched him long in silence.

If Harold Seton had been his own son the monk could not have loved him better than he did. He knew his influence over him, and he laid it to an almost filial affection on the young man's part for himself. In a measure he was right, not entirely. His was the influence rarely gained in this world by any save those who have either sinned or sorrowed very deeply. Padre Felipe had done both. He was a cadet of a noble Spanish family, and had shown from childhood an absolute passion for military fame. There were many illustrious soldiers among his ancestors, and the boy's ardour was warmly encouraged. But his military career, though a most promising, was a brief one. He fell in love, and he loved with all the vehemence of such a nature. The girl was young and beautiful, and she loved the soldier ; but a soldier's wife her father said she should never be. He had, himself, considerable diplomatic interest.

If the young man would give up a military life, and take to diplomacy, the moment he had secured such a position as was fitting for his intended bride she should be his. It was a hard struggle, but love conquered. The soldier gave up his sword, and adopted a profession for which he was certainly suited by nature, but which had little charm for him ; and he worked hard for years, cheered on by his hopes. At last came the day when he thought he might fairly claim his bride, and then the thunderbolt fell. His love was false. A richer man had stepped in ; had won the fickle beauty, and was about to become her husband. Back to his diplomatic career the slighted lover turned, with bitter hatred in his heart. And he worked harder than ever, even while he plunged into all the depths of a most profligate career. Nor did he rest until he had won both wealth and position, such as her husband could never give the woman who had so cruelly deceived him, and proudly displayed them before her eyes. Then he turned his back upon the world, threw aside as worthless the wealth and honours he had won, embraced the priesthood, and, as Padre Felipe, sought a refuge in the distant southern monastery. What conflicts he had gone through there were known to none. He was always silent and reserved, but strange sounds had been heard in his cell, and the brotherhood were somewhat afraid of him. It was years before his face wore any other look than that of fierce, determined composure ; but it changed at last, and by degrees peace settled down over the lines which nothing in this world could ever efface.

The days of Harold Seton's remaining stay at the monastery passed rapidly. Padre Felipe and he were almost inseparable ; yet, in spite of all the love and reverence with which he listened to the monk's exhortations, he was perfectly aware that the life which was before him wore a very different aspect in Padre Felipe's eyes from what it did in his own. Each mind gave the colouring of its own partly

natural, partly acquired tone of thought to the subject. To the monk it was lighted by all the glowing warmth of a meritorious self-sacrifice. Harold Seton's training would not let him regard it in that light, but none the less did he value Padre Felipe's counsels. Their value, lying as it did in the speaker's profound knowledge of human nature, and in the force with which a man speaks when he draws his words from the depths of his own experience, was in no way impaired by the fact that the two regarded the subject from a different stand-point.

There were words of warning to be spoken yet, as well as words of encouragement, before Padre Felipe could feel satisfied his disciple was armed at all points. But they were warnings reserved for the last, that they might rest in his mind with all the weight of last words.

Harold had long been in the habit of spending many hours of the night in Padre Felipe's cell. It was but little sleep the monk ever took; and his time was better spent, he said, in revolving living ideas fresh from the world he had so long since abandoned than in poring over the musty volumes which were the general companions of his solitary hours.

"Your step is very light to-night, my son," he said, as Harold entered the cell, on the last night of his stay at the monastery, "lighter than my heart. I shall miss you sadly."

"I do feel almost light-hearted, father, to-night. Life doesn't look as it did six months ago; and the prospect of action is pleasant enough, in itself, after such long idleness."

"Ah, you are young, and young minds, like young limbs, soon get restless in idleness. But does your future life look so very bright now?"

"Not absolutely. It could never do that. But bright by contrast."

"My son," replied the monk, gravely, "have a care. Do

not count the battle won before you have buckled on your armour. You are not yet face to face with the fight."

"I don't think I under-estimate the conflict, father."

Padre Felipe was silent, and Harold's face grew rather grave.

"Do you think I do?" he added, after a moment's silence.

"Not in theory, my son. But trials and temptations in theory are very different from what they are in practice. I would only have you ever on your guard. There have been many men whose saintly lives have seemed, to the world, as though they had lifted them completely out of all the struggles and conflicts of this mortal life into a region of undisturbed and holy peace and calmness. But it is only to the world it seems thus. Could we read the inner lives of such men, we should ever find that even the greatest of saints, in the estimation of his fellow creatures, is, in the sight of God and of himself, but a miserable sinner struggling with faltering steps along the narrow road, and only upheld from falling back into eternal perdition by the infinite love and compassion of his great Master."

"I never dreamed of being a saint, father."

"No man is farther from it than he who does. I would only have you on your guard against estimating too lightly the temptations and trials before you, lest they take you unawares."

"The temptations and trials of living alone, in the midst of the world," said Harold, thoughtfully, "unprotected by the seclusion of a cloister life."

"My son!" exclaimed the monk, with sudden vehemence, "never dream that a cloister life is a safeguard from temptation. Do you remember"—and his voice grew low and tremulous as he spoke—"the awful list given by Him who alone knew the profoundest depths of human nature, of those things which proceed out of the heart of man?"

And do you think that wherever man takes that heart with him those evil things will not come, with all their power to defile, how pure soever in the eyes of man his life may be? No, my son, the cloister has its advantages, but not for young men like you. The world has its dangers, but it has its safeguards as well; the cloister has few safeguards. He who gave that fearful picture of the human heart would not that His own should be taken out of the world, but that they should be kept from the evil. And for young blood, at least, the active work of the world is a great safeguard from much evil."

Harold made no answer, but a sudden flush had passed across his face as the monk spoke, which showed his words had gone home. There was a long silence,—one of those silences very common in the midst of their conversations. Where ideas are many and deep, words are not generally very plentiful. It was Padre Felipe who broke the silence at last.

"My son, there is one danger, one temptation, in your future path, on which we have never touched."

"I know it, father."

"Are you on your guard?"

"I hardly know."

Padre Felipe glanced at his face for a moment. Then he asked, in a low tone,—

"Have you ever loved, my son?"

"Never!" exclaimed Harold. "No, thank God, that at least has been spared me. You know what men brought up in the world are, father. I do not mean to say I have not, as a boy, dreamed I was in love with some fair face, but it never came to more. And now I do say, from my heart, thank God for it."

Padre Felipe clasped his hands together tightly, and his voice was very unsteady as he answered,—

"Then, my son, you do not fully know your own danger.

I told you there was hot blood in your veins. I tell you so again. Your temperament is more a southern than a northern one. Many a man, placed in your position, would have deemed it a fair excuse for a life such as I believe you would never have led ; such a life as now must never even cross your thoughts. But your very profession will throw you much among the best and noblest of women ; women whose love would be a treasure beyond all price. As you value your peace—as you would avoid agony such as would make all you have suffered, or ever will otherwise suffer, seem nothing by comparison—guard well that love does not take root in your heart before you are yourself aware of it. If you once learn to love, my son, your earthly path will be dark indeed. You will not be able to shake off the passion as some men might. It will master you with a force which will make you pray that death may come and end the conflict.”

“ Pray for me, father, that I may be spared.”

“ My son, I have spent many hours praying that this last bitter drop may not be added to your cup. But should it come, let not your courage fail. Like the Patriarch of old, go boldly forth to the sacrifice without shrinking, and reap the patriarch’s reward.”

In his inmost heart Padre Felipe did not believe Harold Seton would be spared the trial. He deemed him little likely to pass through life without love gaining the mastery over him sooner or later. And his prayers had, in truth, been much oftener breathed that he might be strengthened for the trial than that he might be spared it.

Daylight had dawned before Harold left the monk’s cell, and then he was very pale and thoughtful, but better prepared for his future career than when he entered it. Long and fervent had the monk’s counsels and exhortations been, and very plainly had he spoken words which could only be spoken with no listener near ; warning him, as only

a man who has deeply sinned can warn another, of the strength of passions, the force of temptations, the deadly struggle of the flesh for mastery, probing deep into the nature of the younger man, and bringing a crimson flush over his face, as he seemed almost to have read the very thoughts of his heart ; and showing him how, at times, the thoughts of a man of blameless life would hardly bear comparison with those of the most profligate ; and then, with a strange mingling of a father's love, and of the acquired tone of authority habitual to him as a priest, bidding him go forth and conquer in the fight, for the honour and glory of his Master's name.

Back to the world again. It seemed to Harold Seton almost like a rude awakening from some dream, to find himself mixing once more in the busy whirl of ordinary life. There is often, as in Harold's case, a great gulf fixed between our inner and our outer lives ; the one intangible, unseen, pertaining only to the soul and spirit and to the world ideal, though often to the man himself more real than that everyday outer life which is all the world sees. Yet, paradoxical as such an assertion may seem, however broad that gulf may be, those two lives are very close side by side, and they will sometimes come into collision with a shock which, even while it sends a sudden jar through the whole frame, has, nevertheless, a certain element of the ludicrous running through it.

How sharp a pang the jarring together of these two separate lives would, in his future career, have the power to cause him, Harold scarcely realised as yet. But they came together with a shock, for the first time, when he was roused from a dream over his life at the monastery ; that life which seemed to belong so entirely to the inner one, by a sudden demand from custom-house officers for his keys. He could not but smile, yet he felt the jar ; and a dim consciousness began to dawn upon him then that such

shocks might form a portion, at least, of what would sorely test his powers of endurance in days to come.

Within the year, Harold Seton was sitting with his cousin in his chambers; and, truth to tell, Ralph Seton was speechless with astonishment. He had often revolved in his own mind the question what Harold would do—what he could do, in fact; but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined him taking such a course as he now announced he had decided on adopting.

Harold did not trouble his cousin with anything beyond a brief statement of his intentions—a statement made calmly and quietly, but with a firmness and decision which showed that his resolution was unalterably fixed, and that he was not afraid to pledge himself to it by an open declaration. In his bewilderment Ralph began something like a vague remonstrance, but Harold checked it, almost sternly.

“Not a word, Ralph. Remember, any remonstrance from you must be in a measure insincere. I know this is a course you would never have dreamed of suggesting, but I know equally well it must be, as far as your own personal feelings are concerned, a most satisfactory one to you. Nay, old fellow, don't attempt any denial. I know exactly what you feel, and how your regard for me and your own personal feelings clash; but I don't wish to enter upon any discussion of the subject. We have only the business part of the question to settle. In appearance I of course continue to act as possessor of the property, but in reality you manage the Rookwood estates as you please from this day.”

“And let you shift the possibility of being an usurper off your own shoulders on to mine,” Ralph exclaimed, almost bitterly.

“Not at all. I don't do this as a matter of right, but of choice. Where would be the use of a large fortune to me?

I shall have, as it is, a larger one than I can ever spend. My Lady Seton's fortune must of course remain with me. I could not act otherwise with regard to that. At my death, by the terms of her marriage settlement, it will revert to a distant relative of her own. This arrangement will render this painful uncertainty of no ultimate consequence; while, at the same time, it will place us in a position to act promptly and easily should any discovery ever be made."

"Will any such discovery ever be made?" Ralph said. "I would to God it might."

A dreamy, absent look came over Harold's face. "I don't know," he said; "sometimes I fancy perhaps it may when too late."

The words came dropping out slowly, as though he spoke almost unconsciously; then he hastily added, "You had better make Rookwood your head-quarters, Ralph. It is a bad thing for a large house to stand always empty."

"Harold! I can't stand it," Ralph exclaimed.

"I can, my dear fellow. You warned me against Quixotism, don't go in for it yourself. Believe me, Ralph," he added, gravely, "such an arrangement will make me happier than I could be under any other circumstances. Good-bye, old fellow, I wish you were the younger man now. But Charlie will have his own, whatever the case may be with you."

Ralph Seton grasped his hand with a force which said all an Englishman can say in that silent language—and that is not a little; and there was something in his manner very nearly approaching to reverence. Had such a line of conduct been laid before Ralph Seton, as a mere abstract case for an opinion, he would probably have looked superbly down upon it from the heights of superior wisdom, and pronounced it far-fetched, romantic; indicative, certainly, of a very honourable disposition, but very weak-minded.

Face to face, however, at that moment, with a man who had dared openly to pledge himself to such a course rather than run the risk of defrauding another man of his rights, he felt much too insignificant to do anything save look at his cousin with silent respect, as a being possessed of a higher moral nature than he had ever supposed it possible could fall to the share of weak humanity.



CHAPTER VIII.

AN ECCLESIASTICAL PERPLEXITY.

THE great bell of St. Dunstan's, the parish—in fact the only—church of the town of Middleborough, was tolling one fine spring morning. The sound passed like an electric shock through the town, although every one had been daily expecting to hear it for the last fortnight. The rector had been seized by a severe paralytic stroke three weeks before; and it was universally known that his recovery was hopeless. He could only linger a few weeks. Still, the announcement that he was actually dead produced a great sensation in the town—a greater one even than is usual under such circumstances, for reasons to be hereafter explained.

Middleborough was a large and thriving town, composed of somewhat heterogeneous materials. Thirty years before it had more resemblance to a cathedral town than anything else. The church, almost a cathedral in size and beauty, stood near the top of a hill, which sloped gently down to a valley of broad meadow land, through which ran a river. Round about the church were clustered a number of comfortable, though rather old-fashioned houses, which were inhabited by an extremely select and aristocratic circle: offshoots from the great families of the county dwelt there; the society was charming; the place not expensive; and it was near enough to the sea to be considered very healthy. All these advantages had proved sufficient to attract aristocratic waifs and strays of limited incomes from greater

distances, and by degrees the society of Middleborough had become very select indeed. The rest of the town consisted of a few very irregular streets, straggling down the hill towards the river. That was the state of Middleborough thirty years before the bell was tolling for the rector; but a change was impending. The river was affected by the tide quite as high up as Middleborough; and this fact succeeded in impressing itself so strongly upon the mind of a resident engineer, that, being of a speculative turn, he set himself to the consideration of making it navigable, at least, for small craft. A very slight investigation was enough to convince him it could be done, even more easily than he had at first imagined; and, before very long, he succeeded in getting his project carried into effect. Middleborough then began to be of some little importance, and, in consequence, soon after a new railway was so engineered as to take the town in its course. Then the transformation of the place was substantially completed, although its effects were not immediately visible. It began to increase rapidly in size, adding to the old original aristocratic element the motley one of a half commercial, half seaport, town, with all its attendant train of evils.

These ingredients could, of course, never mix. The aristocratic element shuddered at the deluge of modern vulgar commercial activity which thus burst in upon its tranquil repose, and retired within its own sacred precincts, leaving the lower part of the hill side, and the land immediately surrounding the river, to its intruding neighbours. For a while the "town people," as they were termed by the higher circle, had quietly contented themselves with this arrangement, and dwelt humbly at the feet of their more exalted neighbours; but, after a time, a change came over their dispositions in this respect. In the natural course of things, commercial activity resulted in commercial success; commercial success means making money; and making

money, in this country at least, means a great deal. The town people did not at all see why, if they could afford to pay for them, they should not occupy some of the houses within the sacred precincts, or build them for themselves. There was plenty of good building land about the top of the hill, where the air was certainly more healthy than lower down its slopes. Armed with the unanswerable logic of heavy balances at their bankers, they made good their point; preferring, in general, however, to build for themselves rather than occupy houses which were a great deal too old-fashioned for them, and gradually surrounding the sacred quarter with a cordon of smart, modern villas, profusely adorned with plaster decorations.

The aristocratic element shuddered afresh; thought of imperial Rome overwhelmed by the northern barbarians, and raised its eyes to heaven, as though invoking vengeance on the impious intruders. But no vengeance fell. The intruders lived and prospered in their villas; yet the time-honoured divisions were broken through more in appearance than in reality. The commercial element might make good its position on the sacred heights, but it could not force the aristocratic element to mix with it. The latter had its revenge to a greater extent than it was probably itself aware; for, as was Mordecai the Jew to Haman, so is an aristocratic circle to a democratic one which it persists in quietly ignoring, as the aristocrats of Middleborough did their intruding neighbours

Through all these years, while the town was so rapidly increasing on all sides, it never occurred to the rector that the change in his parish required any change in his management of it. He had held the living for nearly fifty years when he died; and on the day of his death all his parochial machinery for the management of a flourishing commercial town was exactly what it had been fifty years before for that of a small country one. So, as it always

happens where the church fails to do her duty, others stepped in and occupied the ground. Chapels had risen where churches should have stood, and many had gone away to them who had, nevertheless, more sympathy with the Church than with Dissent ; but not with the Church as represented at Middleborough.

Nor was this the whole extent of the mischief wrought by the inactivity of the rector. He had persevered steadily in his own strictly Conservative course, but he had not been able to bind other men down to the same. The onward movement had been too strong for him ; and all he had gained by refusing to guide it was to lose the chance of turning it to good account. He had had one or two curates possessed of more zeal than discretion, who had endeavoured to sow the seed of religious energy and activity, and, for want of care and discrimination, had sown that of party spirit instead. One of these curates had devoted himself entirely to the task of getting the church restored, a work much needed, but which he would have been a wiser man to have left to other times and hands. It had been the signal for the infusion of bitter party feeling into the already inharmonious parochial elements. The aristocratic circle were Conservative, and strenuously opposed the sweeping away of their high, old-fashioned pews, where they could worship God in dignified seclusion, without the danger of being in any way mixed up with their fellow sinners of the lower social scale. Even among those who warmly supported the attempt, there was much division as to the method of carrying it out. The restoration was effected at last ; but all the animosity and bitter feeling raised over it continued to flourish most luxuriantly, while the darkness of heathendom reigned in the lower parts of the parish. There was but one point on which all were unanimous, and that was that there was no chance of doing anything at Middleborough as long

as the rector lived. Appeals had been made to the bishop with representations of the spiritual destitution of the place; he had tried to do what he could, but his powers were but limited, and the rector opposed to every suggestion of any change the dead weight of passive resistance.

It was little to be wondered at that such a state of things rendered the death of the rector a subject of intense interest. Every one felt that with him would certainly pass away the old worn out system which belonged so completely to a past age, and that with his successor would come in a new one. There ended the unanimity of opinion. What that system would be was matter of grave doubt; what it ought to be, of much declamation.

The aristocratic circle devoutly hoped the new rector would be a man of moderate views, and not disposed to too much religious activity. There was a certain vulgarity about activity which painfully jarred upon their sense of refinement. An active, hardworking rector would be, to their moral nerves, just such a trial as a footman who rattled plates and slammed doors would to their physical nerves. They had become reconciled to the restored church, chiefly because, when the old pews were taken away, it had been discovered that they had become receptacles for both mice and moths; but they longed for a continuance of the undisturbed spiritual tranquillity which was a part of the old system.

It was among the town people that most lively interest in the new rector was shown. It was among them that active religion flourished, at least in their own opinions. Certainly they bit and devoured one another with right good will; but could all the animosity of party spirit have been extracted from their religion, it would probably have proved rather a sickly sort of plant.

There was no chance for Middleborough, softly murmured the aristocrats, unless the new rector was a man of

very moderate views, and not disposed to religious activity. There was no chance for Middleborough, was shouted up defiantly from below, unless he was a hard-working man, and thoroughly evangelical in all his sentiments. It was all up with Middleborough, rose another cry, unless he was a sound, good Churchman. Only let him be thoroughly Anglican in all his views, was loudly chanted in another quarter, and there would be some chance for the place.

What the rector would be no one was prepared to say. The appointment rested with the bishop, and over the bishop hung grave doubts—doubts as to his strict orthodoxy. He was terribly uncertain in his appointments. Sometimes they seemed to favour one party, sometimes another; and such proceedings could only arise from an alarming laxity of principle. It was true, taking a broad view of the whole diocese, his work had been most evidently successful. Nor did any one deny that he was an indefatigable worker; untiring in his zeal for the welfare of all those committed to his spiritual charge, and to his clergy always kind and courteous, ever ready to aid them with judicious counsel and hearty sympathy in all their trials and difficulties. But where was the use of all these qualities in a man over whose strict orthodoxy there hung the least doubt?

While all Middleborough was thus engaged in laying down the law as to what the new rector ought to be, and discussing eagerly what he would be, the bishop was occupied in anxious consideration of the latter question only. On the former one his mind had been long made up. No parish in his whole diocese had caused him so much anxiety. He had long wished for a change, and yet dreaded the necessity of choosing for Middleborough. It was a post needing so many qualities, which it was hard to find in one man.

The bishop and his chaplain were sitting in the palace

library late one night, discussing the subject. The bishop's face wore a very perplexed expression.

"Where are we to find a man fit for the post?" he said, at last.

"We have considered every available man in the diocese, my lord."

The bishop was silent for a time. Then he said,—

"We shall have to seek one out of the diocese, Selwyn."

"Out of the diocese, my lord?"

"Yes," replied the bishop, decidedly; "I see no help for it. I don't like doing it, but this is an exceptional case. I cannot sacrifice so important a point as securing a really competent man for that unfortunate place, to the mere wish to give the appointment to some one in the diocese."

"Well, my lord, if you are disposed to go out of the diocese, the case becomes much more simple. The position is certainly an exceptional one; and there is an exceptional man ready for you."

"Where?"

"In London, working as a curate in one of the poorest and most crowded of the East end parishes."

"What is his name?"

"Seton."

"And in what is he exceptional?"

"In every way. He is a man of fortune; has good property in the North. I remember hearing of him at Oxford. He intended to enter Parliament then; and more than one good judge predicted he would be one day one of our leading statesmen. Suddenly, no one knows why, he changed all his intentions, took orders, and has been working hard for the last two years at the East end of London. From all I have heard of him, I am certain he would be the very man for Middleborough."

"How old is he?"

"About seven-and-twenty, I should think."

The bishop shook his head.

"My dear Selwyn! you recommend so young a man for such a post?"

"Most confidently, my lord. He is no ordinary man. I wish you had seen him yourself. I am sure you would have been as much struck with him as I was. He looks much older; and, though he has a most winning manner, there is something about him which involuntarily inspires respect. I heard an extraordinary account of the amount he had done in the parish where he is working."

"But it seems to me his proceedings have a ring of enthusiasm about them." The bishop had, like most bishops, a dread of enthusiasm.


"Not the least, my lord. He has not a vestige of it about him. There has been something unusual in his past life. One feels he is a man with a history. I can't imagine a man better suited to Middleborough; and then his large fortune would be an immense advantage. No man without some private fortune can hold that living now."

"I see you are determined he shall have it," the bishop said, with a smile.

"With your lordship's approval."

"Well, I will consider of it."

The bishop did consider of it, and made various inquiries, the result of which was that he wrote to Harold Seton, and offered him the living of Middleborough, saying, at the same time, that as the circumstances of the case were peculiar, he should like, if possible, to have a personal interview with him before he returned a positive answer, and begging him to pay him a visit at the palace. A request indicative, the bishop thought, as he wrote, of an exceptional case, in that he could ask a curate to undertake a long and expensive journey, only to consider of the possibility of accepting a living.



The bishop fell a victim to first impressions, as his chaplain had done. Harold Seton had not been at the palace a day, before he was as anxious as the latter to see him rector of Middleborough. Very plainly, nevertheless, did he warn him of the difficulties he would have to encounter if he undertook the work.

"It is a task, Mr. Seton," he said, "from which many men would shrink. I should not like you to enter upon it without a full perception of all its trials and difficulties. I am sure you will feel that, as head of the whole parish, you have no right to identify yourself solely with one party, to the entire exclusion of the wishes and feelings of every other; yet, unless you do this, you must be prepared, for a long time, to stand alone, and to work on steadily and undaunted until you have had time to establish such an influence with individuals as shall make up for a lack of general popularity, which is a thing unattainable, as I don't doubt your experience of the world has shown you, without joining yourself entirely with a party."

Harold smiled. "I am not very susceptible on that point, my lord. The arduous nature of the position you have offered me is the greatest inducement to me to accept it. Hard work and serious difficulties with which to grapple, are greater allurements to me than any amount of popularity."

"I hope, Mr. Seton, you are not one of those enthusiastic workers who seem to consider it a meritorious self-sacrifice to work themselves to death in the shortest possible time."

"I do not believe in meritorious self-sacrifices, my lord."

"I am glad of it. I like calm, steady workers, not enthusiastic ones. The latter seem often, for the moment, more successful; but my experience is that their work is not so durable as that of the former class."

"I trust on that point your lordship will be fully satisfied.

I do not think I am in danger of becoming enthusiastic on any subject."

The bishop felt there was more in the tone than in the words, and thought of what his chaplain had said about Harold Seton being a man with a history.

"There is one question I should like to ask you," he said.

"Your being a man of independent fortune is, as I told you, peculiarly advantageous in the case of this living; but I understand you are possessed of considerable landed property. Under these circumstances, are you always to be an active worker in the church? I should not like to send any man to Middleborough who would be likely, after a few years, to resign. Do you intend always to hold a living?"

"Always, my lord. I shall never give up the work as long as life lasts."

The tone was more energetic than the question seemed to the bishop to need; and a faint dread of enthusiasm began to creep over him again, only it was so utterly out of keeping with both the face and the manner of the man before him.

"Then you will go to Middleborough for a few days, and let me have your answer when you return. I trust it may be an acceptance of the living. I believe you have," he added, with a smile, "every qualification for the post, save one."

"You mean, my lord, you would rather I were a married man," Harold said, in a grave, measured tone.

"Exactly."

"My lord, I have no intention of ever marrying."

"Not from any approval of the doctrine of clerical celibacy, Mr. Seton, I hope?"

"Not in the least. My feelings and intentions on the subject are purely personal."

“Ah, then I think I know exactly what value to put upon them,” the bishop replied, with a smile.

Why did he say it? Simply because he was a man, and therefore blundered after the manner of men. A woman would have adroitly changed the subject after Harold's first answer; but the case was quite beyond the blunter susceptibilities of men. During the three years which had passed since Harold Seton had first felt the painful jar produced by the clashing together of his two lives, he had often quivered under shocks of a like nature, and had learned to regard them as a part of the burden laid upon him, and to appear outwardly unmoved by them; but none the less were such remarks barbed arrows to him. He answered quietly enough, however, without the least trace of the sudden tightening of all the mental muscles—if such an expression may be permitted—caused by the bishop's words.

“You must not count on that, my lord. If you consider it a point of vital importance that the rector of Middleborough should be a married man, we had better consider the negotiation at an end.”

“Not in the least,” exclaimed the bishop, his masculine susceptibilities awaking, at last, to the fact that something was out of tune. “I did not, for a moment, mean that. Under any circumstances, there is no man I would so gladly see rector of Middleborough as yourself.”

After the bishop was left alone, and had thought a little over the matter, it occurred to him that perhaps Harold Seton had been crossed in love, and then he began to feel sorry for what he had said. Still the idea was rather a satisfactory one. It was an easy way of accounting for what was peculiar in him and his conduct, and tended to allay the fears which were still lurking in secret corners of the episcopal mind—that he might be inviting into his diocese a young enthusiast with a mission. The thought

of his own blundering sorely grieved his kindly nature, however; and, having quite made up his mind he had lighted upon the truth, he mentally exclaimed more than once, "I wish I had said nothing to him about marrying, poor fellow."



CHAPTER IX.

THE NEW RECTOR'S FIRST CONQUEST.

"CONFOUND it!" exclaimed Major Thornton, as he came in from church, one Sunday morning, "if the bishop doesn't settle the question about the living soon, I shall be off until he does. It's past all bearing."

"It is really very disagreeable," sighed Mrs. Thornton. "Those town people are so very pushing."

Major Thornton was a retired cavalry officer, a member of the aristocratic circle, and the rector's churchwarden. His colleague in office was Mr. Williams, a wealthy tallow chandler and very worthy man, though one of the first invaders of the aristocratic circle. He had been rather early at church that morning, and had been besieged with questions about the new rector. A rumour was abroad that the living was given away, and it was supposed the churchwardens would be sure to know about it. Mr. Williams declared he had heard nothing, and said they had better ask Major Thornton; he, being the rector's churchwarden, would be most likely to receive some communication from him first. Therefore, as soon as service was over, a general assault was made upon Major Thornton. Portly men of business blocked up his path while they sought information, and gaily attired damsels almost held him by the coat tails, while they implored him to tell them who was the new rector, because they were dying to hear, and he must know; their adroit mammas seizing the opportunity of being seen in public, speaking to Mrs. Thornton.

Major Thornton knew nothing about the matter, and at last he fairly lost his temper, and exploded in wrath the moment he was free from his tormentors. It is certainly no slight trial to a man's temper to be perpetually questioned upon a subject about which he knows nothing.

Mrs. Thornton was really quite overcome. She sat down upon a sofa, and applied herself to her vinaigrette in silence. Mrs. Thornton was an offshoot of an aristocratic family in the neighbourhood, and had married late in life. She was not in any way remarkable. She was tall and slight, with some remnants of spinster-like precision and neatness in her dress and surroundings, with a soft, low voice, not very many ideas, and very white hands. Her chief characteristics were a horror of anything like coarseness or impropriety, and an ungovernable dread of beggars and stray dogs—a dread which made it very rare that she ventured out on foot, never unless attended by her husband or a servant, to protect her from any such dangers to which she might be exposed.

"Who was it that read prayers this morning?" she asked, after she had a little recovered.

"I don't know. Some friend of Harrison's, I imagine. He sent me a note the other day to say he had found some one to help him with the duty to-day. He is a fine-looking man, and an uncommonly good reader. I wish Harrison read half as well himself."

"And spoke such irreproachable English," Mrs. Thornton said, with a sigh. "It was really quite a relief. Poor dear Mr. Harrison is excruciatingly provincial sometimes."

Mrs. Thornton's ear was extremely sensitive on the subject of English pronunciation.

"I should like uncommonly to know who the fellow was," Major Thornton continued. "I believe Harrison doesn't intend, under any circumstances, to keep the curacy; I wonder if there is any chance that man is after

it. It would be a great advantage to have such a man among us."

"It would, indeed," warmly responded his wife, as she thought of her periodical dinner parties, and of the difficulty of securing for them any unencumbered men of the stamp she cared to see at her table.

Major Thornton's curiosity on the subject of the irreproachable stranger was destined to a more speedy gratification than he expected. The next morning, rather early for a morning visit, a card was brought to him.

"Who is it?" Mrs. Thornton asked.

"I don't know. Never heard the name—Seton. Where is he, Andrew?"

"In the library, sir."

Thither Major Thornton went; and there he found the reader of the preceding day. Major Thornton was a hasty man, and had a habit of jumping at conclusions. He made a shot at one now.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "our reader of yesterday morning. I thought the name was strange to me. I hope, my dear sir, by seeing you here, a surmise which has occurred to me is correct—that you have some intention of trying to obtain this curacy. You must excuse me for saying it, but I can assure you you would receive a warm welcome, after the manner in which you performed the service yesterday. You positively left us nothing to wish for; and it is not often, I regret to say, that one hears full justice done to the Liturgy. I don't know whether the bishop has given away the living yet; I have heard nothing; but I hope, if he has, you have some interest with the rector."

Harold Seton let him finish his speech uninterrupted. He never did interrupt people, even to correct such a blunder. Perhaps it was a part of the quiet endurance he had learned. It certainly requires some power of endurance to

hear a man patiently out when he is tearing away on a wrong idea, in any direction save the right one ; but it is a very desirable habit to acquire. Let him run on to the end of his speech before you explain, and you will probably at once correct the mistake for good ; but interrupt the flow of his ideas, and the chances are, the mistake and the correction will get mixed up in hopeless confusion, producing in the end a blunder tenfold worse than the original one. When Major Thornton paused of his own free will, Harold spoke.

“You are very kind to express so warm an interest in the subject, but you are quite under a mistake. I am not thinking of the curacy.”

“No ? I am sorry to hear it.” Major Thornton internally added, “Then what on earth can you want with me?”

Harold smiled. “The fact is,” he said, “I came over last week for a few days from the palace. The bishop wished me to see something of Middleborough. He has offered me the living.”

“Indeed !”

Major Thornton had very nearly said, “the devil !” Some of his old military bad habits still clung to him, and when, as at the present moment, he was very much taken by surprise, expressions would sometimes escape from him which were a great shock to Mrs. Thornton’s nerves. He remembered, however, just in time, that he was speaking to a clergyman.

“Yes ; and as I am not one of the clergy of the diocese, I feel his lordship has paid me a high compliment. Still, I should not like to accept any living without seeing it, so I came here a few days since. Mr. Harrison kindly kept my reason for doing so a secret ; but I thought before I left I should like to see you. I have no doubt you can give me much valuable information.”

"May I ask, then, if you have decided on accepting the living?"

"I think I have."

"I am delighted to hear it. But do you know what you are undertaking?"

"I think I do. I heard a good deal from the bishop. I have heard a great deal more from Mr. Harrison. It is a sad state of things, but I hope not irremediable."

"You'll find it uncommonly like getting into a hornet's nest, I can tell you," was Major Thornton's not very encouraging reply.

"That is very much what the bishop said. I am not sure it is not rather an attraction to me than otherwise."

"A precious odd sort of an attraction, I should say. You must be differently constituted from most men."

"Or differently circumstanced, perhaps. Certainly all the work and difficulties of such a place are attractive to me."

"By Jove, then, you must have unbounded confidence in your own powers."

"I hope not," Harold gravely replied. "That would hardly be a desirable spirit in which to undertake such a task as the management of this parish. Still, I cannot but feel many accidental circumstances will give me advantages here which another man might not possess; advantages which will aid me greatly in endeavouring to establish a better state of things."

"There's plenty of room for the attempt; whether it will ever be successful is quite another thing. Do you identify yourself with any particular party, Mr. Seton?"

"With none. I do not think the head of a parish has any right to do so. All his parishioners have an equal claim upon him, even for consideration for what he may consider weaknesses or errors."

"Then you will never be popular; they'll all shy at you as they do at the bishop."

"I am prepared for that."

"But have you no desire for popularity?" Major Thornton was beginning to feel rather puzzled.

"Well, it has its uses; I hope if it came I should turn it to good account. But it is a fatal error to aim at it. Nor beyond its use do I value it."

"Really, Mr. Seton, your sentiments are extraordinary for so young a man."

Harold smiled rather bitterly. So young a man! What was there left to him of youth, save the empty shell? He made no answer, beyond the smile, to Major Thornton's remark; and, after a moment's silence, asked him some question about the state of the parish.

Major Thornton's religion did not extend much beyond going to church twice on Sunday, giving his services as churchwarden, and subscribing to parochial charities. But he was a shrewd and sensible man; and standing, as he stood, in something of the position of an outsider, Harold gained from him a great deal of really valuable information; mixed up occasionally with advice how to act, which was generally beside the mark, and with which Harold would willingly have dispensed. He was by no means particularly fond of advice. Few people are, save those who never dream of acting upon it after they have received it. Information is invaluable; but if, when a man has full information upon a point, he cannot discern the right course for himself, his inner lights are probably not in a state to receive much illumination from the external aid of those who are ready to volunteer it, in blissful forgetfulness, often enough, of the fact that the right course for them, under any given circumstances, may not of necessity be the right course for a mind of an entirely different stamp.

Major Thornton insisted on Harold remaining to luncheon, saying he must allow him the pleasure of introducing him

to Mrs. Thornton as their future pastor. Mrs. Thornton received him with her softest smiles.

"Mr. Seton!" she repeated, as Major Thornton introduced him; "can it be possible you are the son of Sir Myles Seton?"

The colour went with a sudden rush over Harold's face, and then left him very pale. He had thought himself armed at every point, but that simple question had found a joint in the harness, and pierced through it in a moment. It was a question he had never dreamed of being asked, and how could he answer it? He made a half attempt at an affirmative, but the words seemed to choke him; and he stood confused and hesitating, for the moment completely beaten out of his usual imperturbable self-possession. Mrs. Thornton was up to the emergency, however. With all the quickness of a practised woman of the world, she detected, almost as the words passed her lips, that something was wrong. What it was she could not conceive; but she saw in a moment that the exigency of the case required her to continue speaking, and she went on, without waiting for an answer.

"Of course, you must be. Alas! how dreadfully old you make me feel! I so well remember your father's return from India, and his marriage. Poor dear Elinor Fané—what a lovely girl she was! I never heard anything more of either her or Sir Myles from that day forward; and now her son confronts me as our spiritual pastor! Well, it will give us an additional reason to welcome you warmly. Now let us go to the dining-room; I am sure luncheon must be ready."

It was by no means true that Mrs. Thornton had never heard anything more of Sir Myles or Lady Seton after their marriage. She had heard a good deal, which, as it came back to her memory, made her think she saw the cause of Harold's unaccountable confusion; and she considered

the occasion one of those when a small prevarication was justifiable.

By the time Harold left, Mrs. Thornton was as nearly in a state of enthusiasm as was possible to her.

"My dear major! what a delightful man!" she exclaimed. "We are fortunate."

"Uncommonly nice fellow, certainly," replied the major.

"Oh, he is really too charming. I have positively lost my heart. I wonder, though, what is wrong about his father? Did you notice how confused he looked when I asked him if he was Sir Myles Seton's son? I was obliged to chatter on, and take it for granted that he was, to cover it. I remember hearing that Sir Myles and Lady Seton didn't get on well. Perhaps he was afraid of some awkward question. It will be well to note that subject as one to avoid."

"Is he well off?"

"I don't know; I don't remember anything about Sir Myles Seton. He was only a knight, you know; he may have been nobody; at any rate, his son is somebody. I shall be miserable till he comes. We must really get him to come to us for a few days at first, while the rectory is being prepared, and ask some of our own set to meet him. How delighted they will be. When may one speak about his coming?"

"Not until the appointment is gazetted."

"Oh, dear, dear! how provoking! I quite long to tell dear Lady Battersby and our own people how delightful he is; and such a good man, too, I am sure. And not married either; that will be such an advantage for our dinner-parties. But I suppose he will be sure to marry now directly. Curates always do, I believe, when they get livings; and then they always have such a lot of children, one is quite afraid to go near their houses. Oh, I hope Mr. Seton won't marry directly."

That was Harold Seton's first conquest in his new parish, and it was not an unimportant one. There were a good many people there who would confide much more readily in their own judgment when they knew what Mrs. Thornton thought about the new rector.

The unexpected offer of the living of Middleborough had in no small degree overturned all the plans Harold Seton had marked out for himself. It had been a nine days' wonder when it transpired that Seton, of Christ Church, had turned parson, and gone to work in the east of London ; and would have been a greater one still, but for the two years' absence which had allowed him to drop out of his own set. After a little discussion as to what could possibly have put such an idea into his head, he was left to his fate, an enthusiast who could not be judged by ordinary rules.

Very quietly he settled down to his work, resolving that the east of London should be his permanent home. Who could be more fit for such a sphere than a man who dared not be idle ; in whose mind lay deep a half-unacknowledged dread, which made him shrink from mixing freely in the social life of his own class ; and who was entirely independent of any emolument arising from his profession ?

He was an idol in the parish where he worked before he had been there a year. Children would crowd round him whenever they had a chance ; weary toiling women, such as are only to be found in large towns, said it did them a power of good just to sit down and tell all their troubles and heartaches to Mr. Seton ; he seemed to understand them so well. Though he was such a gentleman, and, people said, could speak every language under the sun, he seemed to know all about it, just as if he'd been born one of them. Even the men would not skulk away when he came in, as they generally did when the parson appeared.

Nothing seemed to tire his patience or wear out his kindness.

He was happier himself than he had expected to feel; and his letters to Padre Felipe often sent the monk to the chapel to offer up a fervent thanksgiving for his beloved son. Harold said he had so completely succeeded in throwing himself heart and soul into his work, that it was very rare those dark hours came which Padre Felipe had warned him he would have to encounter sometimes. Nevertheless they did come occasionally; and then he was very hard upon himself. People with strong, clear heads often are horribly cruel to themselves. They can throw all their force into the intellectual scale, and ride it roughshod over their own feelings to an extent which it would not be pleasant to contemplate, were such a contemplation possible.

When he received the offer of Middleborough, his first impulse had been to refuse it at once, and he had only gone to see the bishop as a due acknowledgment of the compliment he had received. He very soon, however, began to waver in his resolution. The anxiety of both the bishop and his chaplain, that he should undertake the work, was very evident; and he knew there was much in his position to fit him peculiarly for it, besides the fact of his independent fortune. To stand entirely alone; to resist the temptation of purchasing an apparent present success, at the expense of the future, by courting popularity; to work on, unmoved by accusations of semi-rationalism, and of being, not uninfluenced by narrow party prejudices, but indifferent to vital principles, would be a trial of a man's powers of endurance which he would be better able to meet than most men. The work of the man who accepted the post offered to him, if he would that work should stand the searching eye of the Master, must be to lay a solid foundation—an underground and unseen one, upon which

it was more than probable other men might raise a building worthy to be praised, and for which they would receive praise of men ; while in reality it owed its strength and durability entirely to the unseen, and by men unhonoured, work of him who had patiently laid the foundation. Such a work needed the energy of a young man, without the visions and hopes upon which such energy generally depends, and was therefore the very work for him. Was it not, in fact, the work for which he had been peculiarly trained? It did not take him very long to decide the question ; and with his answer to the bishop he gave his promise as well, that he would take possession of the living at the earliest possible date.



CHAPTER X.

THE NEW RECTOR'S FIRST PASTORAL REBUKE.

MRS. THORNTON would have faced a whole generation of beggars—a whole legion of stray dogs—the morning she saw Harold Seton's appointment gazetted, rather than give up the chance of announcing to all her friends that the new rector was no other than the fascinating stranger who had read prayers, so shortly before, in such a melodious voice, and with such perfect intonation and pronunciation; and who was, she was in a position to assure them, as fascinating in the drawing-room as in the reading-desk.

“Really too charming, I assure you, my dear Lady Battersby; such a good man; and quite a man of the world too. And so accomplished—such a linguist! In fact, one can see, you know, at a glance, that he is a man quite at home in the highest circles of all the capitals of Europe.”

This was a covert thrust. Lady Battersby was a widow of large fortune, and there was a slight, though hardly admitted, rivalry between her and Mrs. Thornton for the leadership of the high life of Middleborough. Each had some advantages, and one of Mrs. Thornton's was that she had lived a great deal abroad in her earlier years, while Lady Battersby had never crossed the channel; so this was an opportunity not to be thrown away. Lady Battersby felt the claw, and laid the remark aside in the secret chambers of her memory for retaliation on some fitting opportunity. For the moment it was better passed over.

Mrs. Thornton had not been long with her dear friend—

for she and Lady Battersby were very dear friends—before numerous select associates came trooping in. Lady Battersby's drawing-room was a favourite rendezvous of the favoured circle. She was slightly lame herself, from an injury to the knee which she had received many years before ; so getting in and out of her carriage to pay visits was a matter of such difficulty to her that she had entirely given it up, constituting her own drawing-room, instead, a general place of resort, chiefly by taking care to be always well supplied with the current news or gossip of the day. The natural result of this state of things was that the moment Harold Seton's name was gazetted as the new rector, there was a general rush to dear Lady Battersby's. She would be sure to know something about him. Mrs. Thornton in secret warmly applauded her own foresight in having gone straight to Lady Battersby. She was in a position, in consequence, to eclipse her in her own territory ; and she did not entirely approve the popularity of her rival's drawing-room.

She repeated her delightful news to every fresh visitor, and a chorus of self-congratulation arose at each repetition of the tale. Not a loud and noisy chorus, as it would have been among the town-people, but a soft melodious one, befitting the refined atmosphere of the circle.

In the course of her morning's perambulations Mrs. Thornton met several of the town-people, with whom she had the misfortune to be slightly acquainted, and by whom she was immediately attacked about the new rector. Very little information did they get. Why should she cast pearls before swine? What could it matter to them to know that he was a man in every way eligible for admission to the privileged circle? But at last she met Mrs. Williams, and then a terrible discovery burst upon her. Mrs. Williams was as full of the new rector as she was herself ; and with an ill-concealed air of triumph told her Mr. Seton had been

at her house after he left Major Thornton's, and had stayed "ever such a time," talking to her and Mr. Williams, that they were delighted with him, and that though Mr. Williams did think he was perhaps a little more High Church than he quite liked, still he was the most charming man they had ever seen.

Mrs. Williams was in a state of high satisfaction, and would have chanted the praises of the new rector for the next half-hour, but Mrs. Thornton could stand no more, even independent of the consideration that she thought she caught sight of an approaching beggar ; so she abruptly wished Mrs. Williams good-morning, and hurried home in a state of high nervous excitement.

Was ever anything so unfortunate? What an error in judgment on Mr. Seton's part ! To mix himself up in that way with the town-people at the very first ! It must have been an error through ignorance. What a pity no one had put him on his guard ! Mr. Harrison ought to have done it ; but then he didn't understand these things. At any rate, he might have told Mr. Seton that Mr. Williams was a tallow-chandler.

Mrs. Williams was as much delighted by her encounter as Mrs. Thornton was chagrined. She was a kind-hearted, excellent woman, but she had her weakness ; and that weakness was an unconquerable anxiety for admission to the aristocratic circle. This she could not obtain, and the one drop of bitterness infused a certain amount of venom into her nature. Alas for weak human nature, and its false estimates of things ! The disappointed desire to be received in a circle where such sterling good qualities as she herself possessed rarely entered, and if they did, in general soon withered, was enough to render the kind and genial-hearted woman at times capable of ill-nature and petty spite, such as made her now rejoice, simply because it was something of a triumph that Mr. Seton should have visited her house

as well as Mrs. Thornton's. This phase of the life before him Harold Seton had yet to discover.

Mrs. Thornton wrote a pressing invitation to him to make her house his home until the rectory could be got ready for him ; assuring him that, considering the sort of people the last rector and his wife had been, she was sure a great deal would be necessary before it could be made comfortable for him. In his unconscious simplicity Harold wondered why. He had received a favourable report from a surveyor of the general state of the house, and thought that if it had done for a married man with a family, it might do quite well for a bachelor. He declined Mrs. Thornton's offer, saying he would rather take possession of his own house at once. All Middleborough forgot every subject under the sun, save the rectory, when signs began to be seen there of upholsterers within, and gardeners without. The arrival of every piece of furniture was duly chronicled ; and the disappearance of every fresh packing-case within the large gates which led into the back yard of the rectory, watched with hungry eyes, craving to know what the contents of those packing-cases were. It was not only a new rector that was in question, it was a rector young, unmarried, and of independent fortune.

At last Harold arrived. No one saw him do so, however. They kept watch and ward in vain. He came late at night, and walked up to the rectory, leaving all his luggage at the station, save a small bag which the servant who came with him carried up for him. It was his own fault. Mrs. Thornton had offered to send her carriage for him, and so had Mrs. Williams ; while his own dog-cart and horses were already at the rectory. The select circle, when they heard it, began to fear he must be eccentric.

Mrs. Thornton wrote a note the very next morning to Lady Battersby, and told her she must break through her rule, and come to tea that afternoon. All their own set were coming to arrange a day when they were all disengaged,

that she and Major Thornton might ask Mr. Seton to dinner, in order that they might all meet him. They must get hold of him at once, lest he should fall into the hands of "those pushing town-people," he seemed so incautious; and as he had only just arrived, he could not possibly have any engagements, so any day when they were all disengaged would be sure to suit him.

Lady Battersby obeyed the summons. Under ordinary circumstances she would not have entirely liked Mrs. Thornton assuming the initiative in this way; but in the present instance it was to be expected. Major Thornton, being the rector's churchwarden, was the proper person to introduce him to his parishioners.

Mrs. Thornton's drawing-room was quite full by the time Lady Battersby entered, followed by her two daughters. Mrs. Thornton was radiant. She was leader for the moment; there was no question of that.

"Dear Lady Battersby, how kind of you to come! We are all dying to know what your engagements are, that we may fix our day. I am so sorry that we cannot have more than fourteen to dinner without an intolerable crowding. We shall be obliged to ask your dear girls and several more of the young people to come in the evening. Would next Wednesday suit you?"

"Yes, quite well. I have no engagements for Wednesday."

"Ah, how charming! We are all disengaged, then; and Mr. Seton is sure to be able to come. I will send a note to the rectory this evening."

"Mr. Seton."

The footman had opened the door unobserved, so the announcement was entirely unexpected. A perceptible stir and rustle passed over the whole room. Mrs. Thornton advanced with impressive fervour, while Harold Seton adroitly picked his way towards her, from one small island of carpet to another, wherever such a resting-place for his

foot was visible among the sea of mingling trains by which he found himself surrounded on every side.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure, Mr. Seton. I heard you only arrived late last night."

"I did ; and a little matter of business, on which I wanted some information, brought me here in search of Major Thornton. I did not know you received this afternoon."

"Or that your rash invasion was to land you among a bevy of women, drinking tea and gossiping," said Mrs. Thornton. "But you must let me introduce you, since you are here. You know we silly women are all your parishioners, and long to feel ourselves objects of your spiritual care."

Harold Seton went through the ceremony with quiet gravity, but his brow contracted just a shade. It was a sort of thing for which he was not prepared. When he had given up the life which was for him so safe a one, amidst all the misery and poverty of the east end of London, he had fancied there would be little danger to be dreaded in the society of a country town, but now he began to doubt whether he had been quite correct in that assumption.

He did not stay long.

"You are not going?" Mrs. Thornton said, as he rose. "Major Thornton is sure to be in soon."

"I will not wait to-day. You will excuse me, I know. I have several things to arrange in the process of settling."

"Then I really think I must tell you what we were talking about just before you came in. I want you to keep next Wednesday evening disengaged. We are all anxious to welcome our pastor, you know. Of course I shall send you a note : but you will not rashly make any engagement, will you?"

"I am very sorry, but I am already engaged."

"No! you don't say so! That is too unfortunate." What could the engagement be? she wondered.

"I am very sorry," Harold repeated ; "but I met Mr.

Williams as I was coming up, and promised to dine with him next Wednesday."

A sudden hush seemed to settle down over the whole room. Mrs. Thornton was surprised into repeating the words,—

"Dine with Mr. Williams!"

"Yes. Why not?"

Harold had detected the impression his words had made, and there was something almost authoritative in the tone of the question. He stood looking at her steadily, as if waiting for an answer.

"I—I—really I didn't feel quite sure whether you knew who Mr. Williams was."

"The parish churchwarden, is he not?"

"Oh yes, he is, and of course that requires you to accept the acquaintance. I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?"

It was the same tone of voice, and Mrs. Thornton began to feel a little nervous.

"I thought perhaps you didn't know what his social position is."

"Some one told me. I am not sure I remember. A tallow-chandler, is he not?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps you didn't know. He is a most worthy man; but there are a great many such people about here, and it requires caution, they are so very pushing. But of course I did not mean to dictate."

Mrs. Thornton was getting quite flushed and uncomfortable. She knew she had blundered; yet, under Harold's steady, searching look, she could not fence.

"Thank you," he said, very gravely. "I see you meant kindly. Mr. Williams is an honourable, upright, and well-informed man. Not very polished, certainly. But where there are all those solid advantages, the absence of a little superficial polish is a matter of very small concern to me."



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I shall be only too glad to number among my personal friends any men of Mr. Williams's stamp."

It was a pastoral rebuke to the frivolous set before him. There was no doubt of that, and they all felt it. Mrs. Thornton had fancied the young rector a charming subject for patronage. From that moment she stood in awe of him. He did not know himself the full force of his own grave, earnest way of speaking; but he saw Mrs. Thornton was a little confused, so he turned the subject by asking for a direction he wanted, and then wished her good-bye.

As he reached the door he heard a voice behind him say,—

"I'm coming to look at your horse, Mr. Seton."

He turned round at the unexpected remark, and recognised in the speaker a girl whom Mrs. Thornton had introduced as Miss Agnes Battersby. She was small, and rather pretty, with a fresh frank face, a nose turning up wickedly at the point, and a neat, compact figure. Her dress and manner spoke quite enough for her predilections, even without sundry ornaments of a sporting character which she wore."

"How did you know I was riding?"

"I heard your horse kicking up no end of a shine on the gravel just now, and I was awfully pleased, because Mrs. Thornton can't bear the gravel to be cut up."

"That is not a right reason for pleasure, Miss Battersby."

"Don't call me Miss Battersby, or I shall be getting confused in your mind with my sister Nelly, who's all chignon and train. I'm Agnes Battersby, and it's no use to lecture me. I'm past praying for. Oh, there comes your groom. My word, what a stunning mare! How she could jump! Wouldn't I like to take her across country! Do you hunt, Mr. Seton?"

"No, never."

"What a bore! I was in hopes you did, and that I might have a spin after the hounds with you. Will you let me take that mare out some day? I'd like to show her at

a meet. You never saw such a set of screws as they turn out here. It's not once in a season one sees a decent piece of horseflesh."

If the girl had had a vestige of affectation about her Harold would have turned away in disgust. As it was, he looked at her with some amusement and considerable interest. She was perfectly natural. It was the case of a plant too fresh and vigorous to thrive in the sickly, artificial atmosphere in which it had been reared, and which had therefore broken away in the first direction in which it could find a breath of pure untainted air.

"I can't promise," he said, "until I see how you can ride. But as your spiritual pastor, I think I shall lecture you again."

"What about? Ah, you mean about liking horses and hunting, and all that. It's no use. Mamma and Nelly are always at me. They didn't see me follow you, or Nelly would have been after me in a minute."

"No, I didn't mean that, Miss Agnes. I would rather see you fond of horses and hunting than of balls and such frivolous amusements; they are less artificial, and therefore less injurious pleasures. But you should not talk like a groom."

"I can't help it. But look here, I came out for something else besides to look at your mare. I'm so awfully glad you laid it into them just now. You don't know how hard you hit them all round. I very nearly sang out 'Bravo!' I was so pleased. We're the aristocratic circle, you know, and they sneer at the town-people, as they call them, and run them down like anything. And as to visiting them, they'd consider it contamination. It's a horrid shame; for if they do sometimes drop their 'h's,' and talk loud, lots of 'em are good, honest, kind people; a deal more kind-hearted than our blessed circle. I do stand up for them, but it's no use. They say I've naturally vulgar tastes; and I'm sure if it's vulgar to be honest, and straightfoward, and kind, I hope I

am. Don't you see, now, how you must have lashed them, and you did it so awfully well too. I was so pleased. Now get on. I must go in directly, and I want to see whether you can sit a horse decently."

Harold Seton would have rather liked to prolong the conversation, but he did not care to keep the girl standing there, so, with a smile, he obeyed.

"You'll do," she said, with an approving nod, as he turned away; "you've a capital seat. You must be no end of a rider. I'll go out with you some day myself. Good-bye."

She went back to the drawing-room.

"My dear Agnes! where have you been?" exclaimed her mother. "I never saw you leave the room, or I should have sent Nelly after you."

"To which unexpected mercy I am indebted for having had a chance of looking quietly at the jolliest mare I've seen for a long time. I wonder where Mr. Seton got her? I shall never be satisfied till I've had her out with the hounds."

"A nice opinion Mr. Seton will have of you," said her sister, scornfully.

"Possibly. He's a sharp-sighted man, Nelly. He seems to me to have gauged the whole lot of us pretty fairly for a ten minutes' acquaintance."

Harold Seton, meanwhile, rode thoughtfully home, feeling, for the first time, rather cast down about his new parish. With its spiritual destitution, with all the evil consequences of long and utter neglect, he was ready to grapple; and he was prepared to meet and strive patiently to overcome all the difficulties which he knew would be thrown in his way by bigotry, intolerance, and the narrow-minded jealousies of the different factions into which the parish was divided. But he had not expected to find superadded to all this the petty jealousy and heart-burnings of social cliques; and to him, in his earnest, single-hearted

zeal for the work to which he had devoted his life, and true and just appreciation of men as men, entirely independent of their social standing, the spirit of which he had that day caught a glimpse, seemed so mean, so contemptible, that he felt it would tax him more severely to bear patiently with it than with many a more serious evil. Yet that cross, too, must be taken up willingly, and carried bravely, if he would one day hear pronounced upon his work the joyful sentence, "Well done, good and faithful servant."



CHAPTER XI.

SOMEWHAT DESULTORY.

LADY BATTERSBY hardly waited until her carriage had rolled away from Mrs. Thornton's door before she indulged herself with a hearty laugh on the subject of her rival's discomfiture.

"It was really too good. Such a ridiculous fuss as she has been making about that man! He certainly he is a fine-looking man, and his manner is particularly good; I wonder he should commit himself that way. I suppose he must be what they call strictly evangelical. I fancy that's something like being a Plymouth brother; and they herd with every one, don't they, Nelly?"

"Dear me, mamma, I'm sure I don't know."

"I think that's it. How dreadful it must be! But what on earth will poor dear Mrs. Thornton do? She can't well let him drop now, and yet, if he is so very free and independent in his proceedings, it will be a cruel shock to her sense of refinement. How foolish she looked!—just like a naughty child being scolded; didn't she, Nelly?"

"Exactly. I was obliged to look away, or I should have fairly laughed."

"She has been positively unbearable since she captured this lion," Lady Battersby continued. "We owe Mr. Seton a vote of thanks for subduing her a little with the weight of his paw; or she would really, I believe, have tried to patronize us all."

Agnes Battersby had been sitting opposite her mother and sister during this dialogue, grim and defiant. It was, in general, her habit to listen in silence to such edifying discourse until her wrath reached the boiling-pitch, and then burst forth in a very different strain. At this point in the discussion she suddenly chimed in.

"Well, mamma, I don't see why you should be so pleased. The cap fitted the whole room pretty well. You know quite well it's just what you would have said to Mr. Seton yourself. You're always running down those people, and I'm sure I don't see why you should."

"I dare say not," retorted her sister. "I suppose they seem very charming to you. Your familiarity with the stables probably makes you feel quite at home in low society."

"Yes, it's very sad, isn't it, Nelly? Never mind, my dear, there's nothing lost. You're the aristocratic prop of the family tree; and I'm sure you've a double-distilled sense of refinement, and wear false hair and train enough for any two girls; so I can afford to be vulgar, and it's all square in the end, don't you see?"

"I suppose, then, it was to show Mr. Seton how much you sympathized with his partiality for those kind of people that you followed him to the door to talk about horses."

"No, it wasn't. I was just as pleased as mamma at what he said, only it wasn't out of spite to Mrs. Thornton; but because he'd hit you all fair, and you knew it too; and that was what I wanted to tell him."

"Agnes! you don't mean that you told him that?" exclaimed both her mother and sister.

"Yes, I do."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," her mother said. "It's really disgraceful. What do you suppose Mr. Seton will think of you?"

"I don't know, and don't much care, if I can only get

him to let me ride his mare. I suspect he doesn't think much of any of us."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me I oughtn't to talk like a groom."

"What, when you told him you were glad of what he had said?"

"No, not then; before that. He didn't say anything then; he only grew very grave, and looked very hard at me."

"Was it a very loving look?" asked her sister, with a sneer. "Can you tell me exactly what colour his eyes are?"

"No, it certainly wasn't a loving look; and I haven't the least idea what colour his eyes are. I wasn't thinking about their colour, but that I shouldn't like to try and meet them if I wasn't speaking the truth. You'd better not go into ecstasies over his sermons, Nelly, when you haven't heard a word, as you used to do with that curate with the long whiskers; he'll see through it in a moment.

Her sister only answered with a contemptuous toss of her head, and turned the conversation by a remark on some other subject to her mother, while Agnes resigned herself to whistling in a subdued key, with a very thoughtful expression of face.

All the different factions listened with breathless eagerness to Harold Seton's first sermon the following Sunday, watching for some "shibboleth" which might guide them how to act towards him. They could make nothing out of his performance of the service. It was very reverent, very impressive, but belonged to no particular school; it was clearly his own individual method. They did not succeed any better with his sermon. It was short, clear, and very practical; and though his manner, externally, was very quiet, there was an undercurrent of deep, impassioned earnestness in his delivery which added tenfold weight to the words themselves; but there was nothing in it to decide

the vexed question ; and the congregation went home still in a state of painful uncertainty, and greatly fearing, in consequence, that Mr. Seton was a man of the bishop's own stamp, and not by any means strictly orthodox, which was very sad for Middleborough.

Mrs. Thornton's dinner-party was achieved in due time ; but its lustre was terribly dimmed by its having to take the second place among the entertainments given to the rector. Mrs. Thornton was hardly herself. She had not quite got over her mortification ; and, moreover, she was most certainly a little afraid of Harold Seton, and found herself more than once pausing, when on the point of making some remark, to consider whether it would be likely to draw upon her that grave, disapproving look, of which she had a remembrance more vivid than agreeable. It was one of her special subjects of self-applause, that her dinner-parties were never heavy ; but heavy enough the dinner that evening would have been but for Harold's own powers of conversation. With the exception of Major Thornton and one or two others, a cloud seemed resting upon all the select circle ; their little brilliant sallies and flippant nothings would not come sparkling forth with their usual easy flow, and Mrs. Thornton was really glad to escape to the drawing-room.

Here there was at least one who did not stand in any awe of the rector, and that one was Agnes Battersby. She was sitting on a couch near the door when he came in.

"Please sit down," she said, drawing her dress aside to make room for him. "I want to speak to you."

"Why should I not stand?" he asked.

"Because your head is such a long way off. Please sit down."

He obeyed, with a smile.

"I want to know how you enjoyed last Wednesday evening," she said.

"Very much."

"I thought you would. They've the best of it."

"Not altogether, Miss Agnes; there are faults on both sides. If there is an inclination to supercilious contempt on one side, there is a tendency to spite and ill-nature on the other. I suspect my admonitions and rebukes will have to be tolerably equally divided."

"I don't expect you'll get a chance of administering another here. I don't suppose they'll profit by it; but they'll at least take care what they say when you are by. They've a deal of tact."

"Hush! you must not be sarcastic. It's a bad spirit to indulge."

"I'm all bad. But I wanted to ask you something else. When you pitched into me about talking like a groom—you know—you said you did it as my spiritual pastor."

"Well, it was only in such a capacity that I could have any right to remonstrate with you on the subject."

"But I don't see how it gave you any. You've nothing to do with anything but our morals. Talking like a groom has nothing to do with our morals."

"Not directly, perhaps."

"Nor indirectly."

"I am not sure of that."

"What do you mean, Mr. Seton?"

"That you run a risk, thereby, of doing a great deal of mischief."

"Go on," she said, "I'm listening. Explain what you mean, clearly and distinctly, like you preach."

"Don't you know, then, that men have a natural tendency, if left to themselves, to deteriorate; and that, for that very reason, women were given a higher and more refined nature, morally and socially, in order that association with them might check that tendency? If you fail to exercise that refining influence you fail to make use of a

great power for good which God has placed in your hands, and for the misuse of which you must give account. If you lower your own social tone, you run the risk of inflicting a moral injury upon every man with whom you come in contact, by lowering his respect for women in general ; and that is a most serious injury to any man."

Her colour had risen as he spoke. "At any rate, you hit hard," she said.

"You told me to speak plainly."

"And you took me at my word. That'll do for the present ; I'll think about that. Some of these people will be coming to listen if we talk any longer. We take a wonderful interest in one another's affairs up here. Please go and talk to some one else now."

"Who would you recommend as possessing good conversational powers ?"

"Well, I don't know about that. Most of the people here can talk fast enough under certain circumstances, but I'm not sure their tongues will be quite so ready where you are concerned. You'd better try my sister," she added, with a mischievous curl of her lip ; "she goes in for no end of refinement. She won't merit a pastoral rebuke on that score."

He rose without speaking, and moved away, though not in the direction of Miss Battersby. And Agnes knew perfectly well he disapproved of at least the tone of her remark. Silence, when it means anything, is generally more expressive than speech. She moved from her position as well, and established herself, in her usual independent way, in a corner by a window, apart from every one else. She felt inclined, at the moment, to think, and not to talk ; and she had no idea of putting any check upon her impulses out of regard to mere conventionality. More than once during the course of the evening Harold Seton caught her clear blue eyes studying his face with an earnest, scrutinizing

look, as if she would fain read him as clearly as he read her.

The fiat went forth after that evening. The rector was very charming, certainly ; quite an acquisition to any circle ; a shade too grave and quiet, perhaps ; but that was, of course, natural in a clergyman ; and there was at least this advantage in it,—a man with such a manner was not very likely to commit himself to any noisy religious activity. It was a pity, undoubtedly, that he should have mixed himself up with the town-people ; but then he was evidently very clever, and clever men were generally a little disposed to eccentricity.

Among the rest of his parishioners opinions were not quite so unanimous. The dictum of the aristocratic quarter had reference only to the man ; beyond that quarter the faculty of abstraction did not flourish, so they were not prepared to pronounce judgment upon the man because they were uneasy about the rector. He would not show his colours ; at least, they said he would not. It did not occur to them to consider whether he might be showing colours their eyes were not gifted to discern. They could not see them, and that was proof enough to them there could be none to see. As long as this was the case they could not but feel a certain amount of suspicion and mistrust about him, however charming he might be as a man. Some of them even thought that circumstance, in itself, suspicious. There was something Jesuitical about it. So the greater part of them resolved to stand quietly aloof, and watch him.

What all this time was the rector doing ? Like a cautious general, reconnoitring carefully before he advanced into an unknown country. Sometimes spending hours in the lowest parts of the parish, fathoming the depth of vice, ignorance, and misery crowded in courts and dens, rivaling even those he had so lately left. At others patiently

listening to long accounts of dissensions and strifes ; and of how the quarrels of various factions had paralyzed every effort which had ever been made to organize a crusade against all this mass of depravity and wretchedness ; or to the idle, frivolous chatter, which laid bare before him such an amount of vanity, heartlessness, and folly ; and strong in his steadfast purpose, facing it all undaunted ; almost rejoicing in the prospect of fighting single-handed against it, for the sake of the all-absorbing interest of the combat, which would surely fill his life too full to leave room for even a thought of anything save his work.



CHAPTER XII.

UNDER THE LIME TREES.

RETURNING one morning, a few months after his arrival at the rectory, from an exploring expedition to some of the lowest haunts of vice in the town, Harold met Agnes Battersby.

"Mr. Seton," she said, with a look of assumed solemnity, "I am not sure I am justified in speaking to you."

"I am deeply grieved. What have I done?"

"Well, there's no knowing. Are you in a hurry?"

"No."

"Then come and walk up and down the lime walk in the churchyard for ten minutes. I have a great deal to say to you."

"Only for ten minutes, or fifteen at the outside, then," he said, as he opened the gate for her. "I'm never in a hurry, but it does not follow I have much time to spare."

"That 'll be quite enough. I can say a good deal in ten minutes."

Harold Seton was not ill-pleased at the proposition. The girl was clever, a quick observer, and so perfectly straightforward and truthful, that he had more than once gained useful information from her. In fact, he had gathered from her random remarks and quaint sayings a more correct estimate of the temper of his people than from anything else.

"Where have you been this morning?" she asked.

He told her.

"Oh, I wish you'd take me to some of those places!" she exclaimed. "I want so much to see some of those dens. They say they're as bad as anything in London. Do take me some day."

"Most certainly I will do nothing of the kind. I should be very sorry your eyes and ears should be polluted with the sights and sounds I have seen and heard this morning. But tell me what you have been doing."

"Ah, that's a very serious question. I've been hearing a great deal this morning. You must know we were at a ball last night nearly ten miles off; and I was so done up with the bad air, and perfume, and refinement, and small-talk, that I set out this morning in search of a tonic suited to the natural vulgarity of my tastes, in the shape of a cruise among the town-people; and I am sorry to say I have arrived at the conclusion that you are a very suspicious character."

"In what way?"

"In every way. I am assured you have been seen in deep and earnest consultation with the Roman Catholic priest, down in those dens where all the Irish live. This, you know, points distinctly to Fenianism. Then you are declared to be hand in glove with the Mayor, who is a rabid Dissenter, and on very friendly terms with a host of other suspicious characters; the natural inference from which is that you can have no fixed principles, but are open, morally, religiously, and politically, to grave charges. Is all this true?"

"A friend of publicans and sinners," he said, with a grave smile. "The premises are correct, certainly. I am not sure I grant the conclusion."

"But what on earth are you doing?"

"Striving, as best I may, to accomplish the work given me to do."

"That's no answer," she said. "I want an answer I can

understand. I don't know anything about parochial work. I do know that you are very different from anything in the way of parsons we've ever seen here ; and I want to understand what you are doing."

"I have a twofold duty to perform, Miss Agnes. To endeavour, on the one hand, gradually to mould both the religion and the churchmanship of the upper classes of my parishioners into a very different form from the present one. On the other, to attack from every possible quarter the absolute heathen darkness which utter neglect has allowed to settle down upon the lower parts of the parish. The former task I can only hope to achieve by my own personal exertions and influence. In the latter I shall need every external aid I can obtain."

"But what good can a Roman Catholic priest do you?"

"I owe more than life to one," he said, in a low tone. "But as far as Mr. M'Carthy is concerned, he is a good man, and an active one ; and both able and willing to help me in endeavouring to procure the emigration of a number of the Irish in those low districts. That, in itself, will be an enormous advantage, and one I could hardly obtain without his help. For the mayor, he is a good sort of man too, in his way, though rather obtuse. At present I have not been able to do much with him. His sole ideas upon the subject are, preaching the gospel and distributing tracts. I have not yet succeeded in persuading him that the duty of the corporation is to attack the social condition of that part of the town ; and that it is useless to provide anything like religious teaching for people if you leave them herded together in a way which must utterly destroy every moral and social feeling. I hope to get him to see this in time but it will be up-hill work. Do you understand now?"

"Quite, and I should like to hear a great deal more about it, but time's nearly up. Do you know, I'm the only improving member of your flock."

"I hope not the only one; but I am glad if you are improving."

"I am indeed. I'm trying to give up talking like a groom. I didn't believe what you said at first, a bit. I set it down to conventional ideas about young ladies. But I thought about it, and I began, after a little, to change my mind; so I'm trying to do better. Perhaps I shall find social improvement will lead to moral. At present, I haven't a particle of religion about me."

"You have its first great requisite, Miss Agnes."

"I? Mr. Seton, I have a respect for your powers of penetration, but you are hopelessly at fault in the present instance. I know nothing about it. I regard even going to church as a tiresome sacrifice to respectability. I do listen to your sermons, because you say such awfully sententious things sometimes, and hit the right thing so exactly; but I don't understand one-half of them."

"Probably not. Still, in spite of it all, I adhere to my opinion. Your disposition is perfectly truthful and sincere. That is the first requisite for a higher and holier life than you have ever dreamed of. You despise all the falsity and hollowness of the world in which you live."

"I should think I did!"

"Then will you think about it, and try to appreciate a life the vital principle of which is absolute, perfect truth?"

"No, I won't, Mr. Seton," she replied, looking up boldly at him; "I'm not a walking sham, whatever other people may be, and I won't promise what I don't intend. I don't want to be religious."

"Then, Miss Agnes," he said, very gravely, "if you do not seek that life, you will one day be driven to it by some very sharp stroke."

"How do you know?"

"I do not hesitate to prophesy it. Time will show whether I am a true prophet or not."

She looked up at the clock. "Twenty minutes you've been talking; good-bye. I shall never be religious, Mr. Seton. Now just one thing more before I go. Drop the spiritual pastor, you know, and be very good-natured. You've seen me on horseback, haven't you?"

"Yes, several times."

"Well, you know I can ride, then."

"Yes, you ride remarkably well."

"Then will you promise to let me take your mare out next hunting season? You half implied you would if I could ride. I want to take her out so much. I'd take no end of care of her. Do you know, I've dreamed of doing it more than once."

He shook his head. "I cannot promise, Miss Agnes. I don't think it would be safe."

"Oh, I'll take such care of her."

"I don't doubt that. I was not thinking of that. But Lady Flora has never carried a lady, and she is a little disposed to be vicious."

"That makes it all the more delightful. You must let me."

"I will not make any promise. I will think about it."

Half petulantly she turned on her heel and left him, but with something in her manner which said she was determined to carry her point some day. Harold went on to the rectory.

A note from Mrs. Thornton was waiting for him there. She had received most distressing intelligence by that morning's post; would he come and see her in the afternoon if possible?

He obeyed the summons immediately. Mrs. Thornton had recovered from her temporary discomfiture. She had made up her mind that of course it was necessary clergymen should both inculcate and practise the doctrine of universal brotherhood, that it was a sort of professional inconvenience

to which they must submit ; and she had been more cautious in her remarks, lauding the rector loudly for his universal kindness and courtesy to all classes of his parishioners, with a secret thanksgiving appended that there was no occasion for her to go and do likewise. He found her bathed in tears and eau de Cologne.

“ Oh dear, Mr. Seton,” she said as he entered, “ how good of you to come ! I cannot tell you what distress I am in. I want your advice so much. Major Thornton only says I must do as I please. It is a case in which he does not choose to advise me at all, as it so entirely concerns myself.”

There is no harder case in which to manifest a proper amount of sympathy than where you are being overwhelmed with relatives, divorced from their antecedents, and have not the most remote idea of what is the matter. Harold could only indulge in a few commonplace platitudes, and wait for some further enlightenment.

“ It has been so sudden and unexpected,” she went on ; “ it has quite unnerved me. I only heard this morning. Poor dear Evelyn ! I am sure I don't know what I ought to do. My only hope is that you will be able to advise me.”

“ I am sure I need not say how entirely any advice I can give is at your service. But you must make me understand first what your difficulty is.”

“ Yes, I know. It is a long story, and such a dreadful one. I have never mentioned the subject for years, not even to Major Thornton, and I never dreamed of having to speak of it. My family never mention it. It is such a dreadful disgrace to us.”

Her distress was unfeigned, though perhaps a little exaggerated. Harold could only wait in silence.

“ I don't know whether you know, Mr. Seton, that I had one sister,” she continued.

“ No, indeed. You know my life has been spent so

much abroad that I have very little acquaintance with English families."

"Ah, yes, I suppose so. Well, I had one sister. It is a long family story I must trouble you with. She was a great deal younger than myself. My mother died when I was about nineteen, and then poor Amy was left entirely to my care. I am sure I tried to do the best I could, but I never could understand children, and she was such a strange one. She grew up so dreadfully wild and headstrong. I can't tell you what I went through. I often told my poor dear father I was sure something dreadful would happen; but he only laughed, and said she would sober down some day. But I was right. At last, when she was about seventeen, a Colonel Macdonald came to the neighbourhood one hunting season. He was a very fine handsome man, about forty, but such a dreadful profligate; he was separated from his wife. I am sure I don't know how he managed it, but he contrived to get hold of Amy. She was very lovely, certainly; but I never knew they had met, except occasionally, out hunting. I didn't know she had ever spoken to him. At last, one morning, Amy was gone—eloped with this dreadful man, though she knew he was married. Oh, Mr. Seton, is it not dreadful? I can hardly bear to speak of it, though it is seventeen years since it happened."

"It is a very sad story, certainly."

"And such a disgrace. It broke my poor father's heart. He was such a proud man. He would not go after her, he said he would never hear her name again; she had disgraced it, and he renounced her entirely. We tried to hush it up, and we kept it more quiet than I could have hoped."

"And what has become of your poor sister?" Harold asked.

"Ah, poor Amy. She suffered dreadfully. That horrid man—he was a perfect savage to her. He got tired of her,

I believe, in a few months, and was always threatening to turn her out of the house. He didn't do that, but I believe he treated her dreadfully sometimes,—at least, I heard so; I never had any direct communication with her. She only lived about eighteen months, and then died in giving birth to a little girl."

"Poor girl, it is indeed a melancholy history," Harold said, more than ever puzzled to account for Mrs. Thornton's outburst of grief, or to imagine on what point she could require his advice.

"Oh, it is too dreadful, and now to have it all raked up again in this way. I must tell you, Colonel Macdonald seemed really fond of this poor child. She has always lived with him, and we had never thought anything more about it. We thought he would, of course, provide for her; but this morning I have received a letter from my brother, Sir Charles, telling me he has heard from Colonel Macdonald's steward. Colonel Macdonald has died suddenly without a will, and that poor child, Evelyn, is turned adrift upon the world penniless. It is really too cruel. I am sure the least reparation he could have made poor Amy would have been to provide for her child. His widow is living, and she, with her eldest son, are expected at the place directly; so the steward says poor Evelyn must be removed at once, and that unless Charles gives him some directions he must send her to the parish authorities."

"My dear Mrs. Thornton! you cannot for a moment allow that?"

"No, of course not; but what is to be done?"

"What became of the fortune your sister would have had, had she remained at home?"

Mrs. Thornton coloured. "Oh, Charles gained all that."

"Then surely he is the proper person to take the charge of this poor child."

“ Well, I think so, but he won't. He was more bitter against poor Amy than any one, and he says, in this letter, he will have nothing to do with the child. I think the way he speaks really quite cruel. The question under discussion, and about which I want your advice is, whether I shall let her come here.”

“ Can you doubt for a moment, Mrs. Thornton ? ”

“ Oh, I don't mean any question about her coming just for a time, it is for good. It is really a very serious consideration. She is but a child—only fifteen, and I suppose very uneducated, and I am really so unaccustomed to children. Then you know, Mr. Seton, it will be so awkward. No one has ever heard of my sister having a child. You know, though we belong to this county, we never came here at all until after Amy was dead, and none of them ever heard of her being married, of course, so this child coming would raise all sorts of remarks, and some of the people are so spiteful and ill-natured. I quite dread it. Then there is another thing ; we cannot provide for her. Major Thornton has plenty of relations of his own, and my own fortune, by the terms of my marriage settlements, at his death, if he outlives me, will revert to Charles's family. If she came to us what would become of her ultimately, Mr. Seton ? It is really very difficult to know what it would be best to do. Do tell me what you think.”

He saw it clearly enough now, and knew his advice would not be welcome. The poor friendless orphan would be in the way, and a subject for unpleasant remarks. Mrs. Thornton was seeking advice only with a sort of forlorn hope that some one might encourage her to take the course she had not quite the courage to follow unsupported.

“ There is but one piece of advice which I can give you, Mrs. Thornton, and that is to act in this matter solely on the consideration of what is right, regardless of all these questions of expediency. The only really expedient course

is the right one. Resolve to do what is right, and do not trouble yourself about anything else."

"But I don't think you can call this a question of right ; nothing binds us to receive this child."

"What will become of her if you do not?"

"Well, I—I—really I don't know."

"Exactly, Mrs. Thornton. She is your sister's child ; her unhappy position is no fault of hers. If her father was fond of her, she has probably been accustomed to kindness, and now she is cast upon the world at a very dangerous age for a girl. You have the power of giving her a home and shelter from all the dangers of her position, at least until she is of a more fitting age to encounter them. I cannot but think your duty very clear, and that you cannot be held guiltless, if you turn from it, should evil consequences result to this poor child."

"Well, I believe Major Thornton would like her to come, only he will not say so, because he wishes me to act as I like ; but I do so dread it."

"Have you no dread of the consequences of refusing?"

"Well, I really don't know. I haven't thought about it. But I feel so unfit to take charge of a child."

"Believe me, my dear Mrs. Thornton, even looking at a subject from the very low standing-point of mere expediency, no one was ever a gainer, in this world, by rejecting a duty clearly laid upon him. Very hard it may be sometimes ; how hard it can be few know, to resolve to tread the right path at all personal cost, but it is the only path which can in the end bring peace and happiness."

"But——" she hesitated.

"But, dear Mrs. Thornton," he gently interrupted, "you know what is right in this case, I am sure you do. Do not try to blind yourself."

Still she had objections and lamentations. Patiently he listened, and gently he combated them, bringing down all

the powers of his own strong, brave nature to enter into and sympathize with the vacillation and uncertainty of a weak one, and to strengthen and encourage it—no slight strain on any strong spirit; and when at last he conquered, and actually saw the letter written, which contained a promise of a home for the poor friendless orphan, he felt that afternoon's work had been a more wearying one than many an apparently far more difficult task would have been.



CHAPTER XIII.

A COMPANION IN MISFORTUNE APPEARS UPON THE SCENE.

MRS. THORNTON'S perplexities and anxieties about Evelyn Macdonald were endless. There was no subject connected with the girl, from the most trivial arrangement of her wardrobe, up to the most important in her education, which did not seem to present an almost insuperable difficulty to her. Major Thornton began to get rather out of patience.

"Hang it, Louisa!" he exclaimed at last, "one would think no one had ever had to take charge of a girl before. I don't see that there is anything so very dreadful in it."

"I dare say you don't; men never do understand these things. But I am sure I feel quite ill from anxiety. I can't think what people will say. It will seem so strange that I should never have spoken of my sister's child, and I suppose she will be a perfect savage. I really sometimes almost repent that I allowed myself to be persuaded to promise her a home. We might have contributed towards having her placed somewhere instead; only Mr. Seton put it in such a way I could not help giving in. It is really most extraordinary, the way he has of putting things. He almost forces one to see things in the same light as himself."

"You're not the only person he has astonished since he came here," Major Thornton answered, only too glad to seize the opportunity of drawing his wife's thoughts away from a subject of which he was not a little tired. "I suspect the whole place is in a chronic state of astonishment at him and his whole proceedings. Such an amount of energy,

determination, and perseverance, I never saw in any man. I really do begin to think he'll succeed in making something out of this place ; that is to say, if he only has time."

"Do you think that doubtful?"

"My idea is, he'll work himself to death."

"How very foolish ! you should really remonstrate with him. Why doesn't he have more curates?"

"Well, he has four already ; and as their salaries rather more than account for the whole income of the living, I should say that question was easily answered. Besides, curates couldn't do his work. He is discreet as well as zealous. I don't think he does anything which they could do as well for him ; but until his machinery gets into really good working order nothing will keep it going but his own personal superintendence in every part. Therefore the more work he finds for them, the more he has to do himself. It will be years before he will be able to relax his exertions at all, and I surely think he must knock up."

"It is very strange, certainly, to see a man of independent fortune, like him, working voluntarily like a galley slave. I wonder what makes him ? Men are generally so idle, unless they are absolutely forced to work."

"There is some cause for it, you may depend," Major Thornton answered, not a little relieved at having succeeded in changing the direction of his wife's thoughts for a time. "He is not a man to do anything without some reason. I only wish all the blockheads here would come forward and second him in his efforts, as they ought to do, instead of thwarting him perpetually with their contradictions and objections. Did I tell you what endless difficulties they are contriving to throw in his way about the new church he wants to have built down by the river?"

"I am sure I don't know what to think," Mrs. Thornton answered, in a reflective tone. "I think Dawson must go."

"My dear Louisa! what are you talking about?"

"I was thinking about Evelyn. Some one must go and bring her, you know."

Major Thornton murmured something, perhaps one of those objectionable expressions before mentioned, not loud enough, however, to reach his wife's ears, and plunged into the morning papers. It was evidently hopeless to endeavour to stem the current of Mrs. Thornton's ideas.

Evelyn Macdonald was to arrive in a few days. Dawson, Mrs. Thornton's own maid, an old family servant, the only person in the house cognizant of the true state of the case, was sent to bring her. Major Thornton discreetly announced, on the morning of the important day, that some business, requiring immediate despatch, would remove him from home for the whole day. He should not be back until dinner-time. Evelyn was not expected until quite late.

To Mrs. Thornton's unspeakable delight Harold Seton came in soon after dinner. He was such a charming companion; it was so fortunate he and Major Thornton were such friends, she said, as it secured them so much of his society. They really saw more of him than any one else did.

"Why am I so particularly welcome to-night?" he asked.

"Oh, don't you know? I made sure your had come on purpose, and thought it so kind. Don't you remember that we expect Evelyn to-night?"

He did not jar her feelings by admitting he had entirely forgotten what was of such paramount importance to her.

"No, indeed," he said, "I have been very hard at work all day, I did not remember it was to-night she was to arrive. I don't think I should have come if I had remembered it."

"Why not? There is nothing I could have desired more. I feel it such an awkward and painful meeting, and

you are so clever in such emergencies. You always have the right thing ready to say. You know I do not know how much poor Evelyn knows herself, and it makes it so very painful."

"What have you been doing to-day, Seton?" Major Thornton suddenly interposed.

"Trying to forward various projects," he replied, with a faint smile. "Endeavouring to make a lot of very good, but not very clear-headed people, understand the moral lesson of the destruction of the herd of swine; that great advantages are not to be sacrificed because they may be, perhaps must be, attended by certain lesser evils. But don't ask me to go into particulars, I am too tired to-night."

"No, don't give me particulars unless I can help you; it makes me furious. I admire and respect your untiring patience and perseverance, Seton, but they are virtues to which I have no claim. I wanted to ask you another question upon a very different subject, which may serve to give a turn to your ideas. Are you going to let that girl, Agnes Battersby, take your mare out this season?"

"I haven't made up my mind. I don't think it is safe."

"Oh, safe! I don't know about that. I believe she would be safe on anything. She is a wonderful rider. But I can tell you you'll have no peace unless you let her. She is a perfect child about anything of that kind, but, at the same time, the most determined little creature, when she has made up her mind to accomplish a thing, I ever came across. She has set her heart upon this."

"I know she has. But at any rate I must have her mother's sanction first."

"She'll easily get that. I fancy I see Lady Battersby putting a veto on anything Agnes wished! I thought perhaps you had fears for Lady Flora; that was why I asked you. I was going to assure you, if that was all, you might

safely yield ; she would take good care of her. The girl is a careful, though a bold rider. She is not of the fast order who ride for show. She is a genuine lover of horses, and would never peril one out of a mere piece of bravado. She would scorn any attempt to show off."

"Dear me ! I am sure I hear the carriage wheels," Mrs. Thornton suddenly exclaimed, starting up. "Oh, my dear Major ! do go and meet her. I really feel so nervous."

"Very well. I'll leave Seton to administer brandy, or anything else that may be necessary, in the meantime," he said, rising with a laugh, "and intrust to him as well the task of seeing that you really receive the poor child with kindness. Don't be stiff and cold, Louisa."

"Oh, Mr. Seton ! I wish it was over," she said, as Major Thornton left the room.

He had some difficulty in repressing a smile.

"It will be directly, Mrs. Thornton ; and it is only the first plunge you need fear. You will be quite yourself the moment she is really in your presence."

There was all the confusion outside for a few moments on an arrival, then Major Thornton's voice saying, "Your aunt is in the drawing-room, my dear," and immediately after he entered, bringing with him a black figure, surmounted by a hat. That was all that could be said.

"Here is Evelyn, Louisa," he said. "Take care of her while I look after one or two things ;" and then like a coward he bolted.

The girl stood irresolute. Mrs. Thornton advanced towards her with a manner nearly as irresolute, saying,—

"I am afraid you must be very cold, my dear. The evenings are growing so chilly."

"No, thank you. I am not very cold."

It was a girlish voice, and very tremulous, but the tone was low and soft. Harold Seton saw Mrs. Thornton suddenly start, and a quick flush passed over her face ; and

then, without taking the slightest further notice of the girl she disappeared as rapidly as Major Thornton had done. He was at no loss to divine the cause of her strange conduct. There is nothing like the tone of a voice for rousing old memories. Their chords are more quickly woke to life through the ear than through the eye. Mrs. Thornton had really loved the beautiful and wilful sister who had brought such disgrace upon her family; and it was her voice, unheard for so many long years, which had so suddenly overcome her.

"Well for the poor child I did come," Harold thought, as he quietly advanced to where she stood still, trembling and uncertain.

"Come and sit down by the fire, Miss Macdonald," he said, "your aunt will be back directly."

A pair of large dark eyes with rather a suspicious glitter in them looked up at him for a moment under the deep shadow of the hat, as though questioning who he was. Then she obeyed so far as to walk forward and stand silently in front of the fire.

"Why did Aunt Louisa go away so quickly?" she asked, at last.

"I think it was the sound of your voice. You know there is generally a strong family resemblance in voices, and I daresay the tone of yours brought back a great many memories to her. Do take off your hat and wraps, and sit down. She will come back directly."

"Who are you?" the girl quietly asked, as she untied her hat. "I didn't know Uncle Thornton and Aunt Louisa had any one living with them."

"I do not live with them. I am the rector of the parish, and only came here quite accidentally to-night, not knowing you were expected. I did not count upon having to introduce myself and entertain you."

She had taken off her hat and large travelling cloak while

he spoke, and handed them to him with the quiet manner of a person accustomed to be waited upon.

"If you will kindly put them down," she said, "my maid will take them. Oh no—I—"

She stopped short, coloured deeply, and bit her lip.

"They can lie here quite well," Harold answered, laying them aside. "Some one can take them up-stairs for you presently. Sit down now, and get thoroughly warm; I am sure you are colder than you choose to allow."

She sat down and gazed into the fire in silence. Harold, leaning against the mantel-piece, quietly surveyed her. The poor girl's unfortunate position was quite enough to make her an object of interest to him, and her evident pre-occupation gave him every chance of studying her unobserved.

She was just the odd sort of mixture girls of her age generally are. In height she was a woman, in figure a child; tall, but entirely unformed, and her face was in the same transition state. Her features, taken separately, were good. Her eyes were intelligent and very clear and honest; her forehead was broad and thoughtful; and her hair fine and soft, and of a rich dark brown shade. But there was a want of harmony of parts, which, taking the face as a whole, was, for the time, destructive of beauty. It was an entirely open question whether, when she had outgrown the transition state, she would be a very handsome or a very ordinary looking woman. She only wanted the painful self-consciousness usual at her age to render her a most awkward and unpromising-looking subject; but in that respect she had an immense advantage over most girls of fifteen. Whatever her training had been it had at least left her a perfectly easy and natural manner, quite apparent, even amidst a degree of nervous timidity which inclined Harold Seton strongly to the belief that the sad fate, entailed upon her by the sins of others, was no secret to herself.

Mrs. Thornton very soon returned, entering the room in

a hurried uncertain way, very unusual with her. Evelyn rose as she came in.

"My dear child," Mrs. Thornton began, as she advanced towards her, "I am really so sorry, but——"

Her speech came to a close, and she stood looking at the girl for a moment. Then taking her in her arms she kissed her with real warmth, saying in a low tone,—

"How like your poor mother you are, my child. It has really been quite too much for me."

Evelyn did not speak. She did not even return the embrace. She only stood silent and passive, with a rapidly varying colour.

Major Thornton shortly appeared, and he succeeded in drawing a few words from Evelyn; but only a few. It would certainly have been a most embarrassing evening but for Harold's presence. At last Evelyn herself produced a favourable turn in the state of affairs by saying,—

"May I go to bed, Aunt Louisa? I am very tired."

"Certainly, my dear, if you like. But you must have some supper first."

"No, thank you, I had rather not. We dined on the road, and I am not hungry. I couldn't eat anything. Please let me go to my room."

Mrs. Thornton was beginning a fresh protest.

"Let her have her own way," Harold said, in a low tone.

"Have you been accustomed to a maid, my dear?" she asked.

"Yes, always. But I don't want one."

"Oh, but Dawson will look after you."

"No, thank you, Aunt Louisa, I had rather be left alone to-night."

She wished her uncle and aunt good night quietly, rather coldly in fact, and walked towards the door. Harold opened it for her. She accepted the attention as a matter of course acknowledging it at the same time in a way which left no

doubt on his mind that some one, or something, had taught her the value of a certain cold reserve of manner.

Mrs. Thornton clasped her hands with a despairing gesture the moment the door closed.

"Oh dear, dear! What a strange girl! What shall I do with her?"

"Nonsense, Louisa. She will be just like other girls when she has got over the strangeness of everything. Don't you think so, Seton?"

"I am not sure that I do."

"I am sure she never will," Mrs. Thornton chimed in. "I shall never be able to get on with her. She seems stupid."

"She is not that, Mrs. Thornton," Harold said.

"Why, she would hardly say a word."

"Not would not, could not. Poor child, you must not be hard upon her. It was taxing her utmost efforts to maintain her composure at all."

"I am sure I thought she was composed enough. Just about as cool and unconcerned as any girl could well be."

Harold did not answer, but he bestowed a pitying thought upon the new comer. Mrs. Thornton might and would try to be very kind, he felt certain; but her house, though it might be a shelter for Evelyn, would never be a home to her.

Evelyn meantime proceeded up-stairs with Dawson.

"This is your room, Miss Eva," she said, opening the door of a comfortable room where a bright fire was burning. "I've put out your things, and I've a tray ready with some supper for you. I'll bring it directly."

"Oh no, thank you. I don't want any supper."

"But you must have some, my dear;" and she left the room without giving Evelyn time for further remonstrance, and soon returned with the tray. She carried her point too of making the girl eat something.

"Now let me help you, my dear. It seems to me only the other day I was waiting on your poor mamma. You make me feel quite an old woman, Miss Eva."

"I had rather be left alone to-night, Dawson, thank you," the girl said, but her tone was very different from what it had been down-stairs; the words sounded more like a plaintive entreaty. "I am very tired, and my head aches. I feel as if I should be better alone."

"Very well, my dear, you can ring if you want anything And don't you fret, dear Miss Eva. You'll be very happy here after a while. Your aunt will grow quite fond of you, I know, if it's only because you are so like your poor mamma; and she did love her dearly. Good-night, my dear."

"Good-night. You'll come and call me in the morning yourself, Dawson, won't you; and tell me everything I must do?"

"That I will, my dear. Just you lie quiet till I come to you."

She left the room as she spoke. Evelyn stood motionless, listening till her retreating footsteps died away. Then, throwing herself down upon the bed, she buried her face in the pillows and sobbed heavily.



CHAPTER XIV.

AGNES BATTERSBY MAKES GOOD HER DETERMINATION.

MRS. THORNTON had not by any means overrated the amount of affectionate interest likely to be manifested in her affairs by her neighbours. Evelyn Macdonald, and her sudden and unexpected appearance in Middleborough, provided a theme for many an animated discussion. The subject was soon worked up to the point of there being something wrong. What that something might be was food for much interesting speculation. Mrs. Thornton had numerous visitors. She was oftener "not at home" than usual; but when they did get in, Evelyn was not generally visible, and there was undoubtedly a certain amount of embarrassment in Mrs. Thornton's manner when questioned about her. The subject got wind, even beyond the select circle. Mrs. Thornton's taste in dress was faultless, and the easy, unconscious grace of her movements, especially when floating up the aisle of the now always crowded church, on Sunday, to her seat, as attractive as it was impossible to imitate; consequently she was rather a marked subject for spiteful observations. Had she known all that was said, and all the conjectures hazarded about her niece, it would nearly have driven her mad.

The subject had been thoroughly ventilated one afternoon in Lady Battersby's drawing-room. Evelyn herself had been pretty sharply criticised, and at last, one of the set, more venturesome than the rest, hazarded a new idea on the

subject. Had it struck any one else, besides herself, that there was a decided resemblance in the girl to Major Thornton?

The suggestion was not received without many expressions of disapprobation and outraged morality; but it was eagerly discussed, nevertheless; Agnes Battersby, the while, listening in silence, but with an ominous glitter in her eyes, and a dangerous spot of colour on each cheek. At last, when the subject had been worn very threadbare, it was allowed to drop for the time, and then she got up and left the room, unnoticed; she was in the set, not of it, and was no great favourite, so her goings and comings were not much regarded.

Ten minutes afterwards she made her appearance in the rectory library, where Harold Seton was writing, all blazing with honest indignation. He was by no means surprised. It was not the first visit of the kind which he had received, nor did he discourage them. She set all conventionalities so daringly at defiance, that she had secured to herself a great degree of impunity in so doing. No one dreamed of expecting Agnes Battersby to make any concessions to propriety. Besides, when she did come, she came for some object, and never stayed after that object was accomplished. He thought, however, that since the day of the conversation in the churchyard she had seemed a little disposed to avoid him.

"What is the matter, Miss Agnes?" he said, as he rose to give her a chair.

"Matter! why, that I am choking with rage."

"Why did you not seek the aid of your medical attendant, then?" he asked, with a smile.

She laughed at that. "I'll tell you what is the matter directly."

"Very well, sit down and recover your breath while I finish this letter."

"Now, then, what is the matter?" he said again, when he had folded and addressed the letter.

She told him bluntly all that had passed. He looked very grave.

"Isn't it a horrible shame," she said, with a stamp of her little foot on the carpet, "to get up such stories?"

"It is no trifling evil. But what made you come to tell me about it?"

"I wanted you to know it. I thought you might do something about it."

He shook his head. "It is the most difficult thing in the world to deal with. It is so almost impossible to bring such sins fairly home; and to general admonitions, and warnings about sins of the tongue, no people listen more complacently, and with more marked expressions of approval, than inveterate scandalmongers. But I am glad you have told me. I will think it over, and the knowledge may be useful."

"The knowledge that you know it will be useful. That's another reason I came. If I had threatened to tell you, they would have thought it was only a threat. When I go and say, as I shall do, that I have told you, it'll be a very different thing, and it will check their tongues more than anything else."

"Why so?"

"Because they are all afraid of you. I don't mean *only* our people, but the whole parish. I believe it was some of the town people hatched up this scandal, and they won't like to know you have got hold of it. It's the same everywhere; you're a sort of giant among the pigmies, Mr. Seton. They'll criticise you behind your back, and call you unorthodox or anything else; but there isn't one of them who would like to face you when they'd been doing wrong, and knew that you knew it. I can't understand it. You're not as popular here as several of Mr. Ross's curates were,

and yet you've more weight, though you haven't been here much more than six months, than the most popular of them had in ten years. Why are you so different from most men, Mr. Seton?"

"Am I very different?"

"Of course you are—you must know that."

"Probably others are more aware of it than I am myself."

"Perhaps; I can't understand it. But look here, Mr. Seton, do you think the Thorntons will hear about this?"

"I sincerely hope not."

"So do I. I don't care about Mrs. Thornton; she's too refined for me. But she isn't a bad-hearted woman after all, and I believe it would nearly be the death of her. I am sure there is something adrift about that girl, too, though I don't let out that opinion in general. Do you believe she is only fifteen, Mr. Seton?"

"I am certain of it. Why should you doubt it?"

"She seems so much older."

"I don't think she looks more."

"No, I don't mean to say she does personally. But she is a strange girl. Don't you think so?"

"I have hardly seen her. When I have been there, of late, I have generally had business to settle with Major Thornton, and have scarcely noticed her."

"Well, I have, and I can't make her out. I liked her awfully when I first saw her. She's not all froth; she's got something in her. But, try as you may, you can't get at her. She isn't shy and awkward, like most girls, but she deliberately keeps every one at a distance. It was the cool, easy way she did it made me think she must be older."

"I am sure she is not."

"Well," she exclaimed, starting up, "I've been here half an hour. I must go!"

"I am very glad you came and told me what you had

heard," he said, as he rose. "It is a long time since I have had a visit from you, Miss Agnes; and I can assure you one or two pieces of information you have given me have been very useful."

She coloured a little. "I shouldn't have come now," she bluntly said, "if I hadn't been in too great a rage to stop and think."

"Why not?" he asked, a little startled. If she was beginning to think about propriety there was danger ahead.

"Because I'm afraid of you too. I know you've got it in your mind to make me religious, and I don't want to be."

"You are talking of what you know nothing about."

"No, I'm not. I know I ought to be, and I know it's the only way to be really happy. But I can't do things by halves. If I went in for it I must do it thoroughly, and I should have to give up things I don't want to give up; so I don't mean to be religious, and I don't want to give you a chance. I can't shake off the things you say. They're not mere conventional phrases; they're truth down to the very bottom. But look here, it's very odd, religion always brings us round to a very different subject; there can't be any connection. But I want one thing before I go."

"Lady Flora?"

"Exactly."

Amidst all his cares and distractions that subject had been occupying a larger share of Harold Seton's thoughts than it might have seemed to merit. In his whole parish there was no single individual interested him more than Agnes Battersby. With her frank, noble, generous nature, and unswerving truthfulness, and steadfastness of purpose, even in trifles, she might be moulded for untold good, could he only bring her under the right kind of training. The first step towards that was to gain an influence over her. She was, in many respects, such a mere child, he was not afraid of such an influence, and he knew nothing would

give him so fair a chance of obtaining it as to indulge her in her darling project. But yet, in spite of her expert horsemanship, he dreaded putting her upon the somewhat vicious mare, who occasionally taxed his own skill.

"I wish you had set your heart upon anything else," he said.

There were signs of capitulation in the words, and Agnes was radiant.

"No, but I don't want anything else; and I only want it just once. I won't ask you again. Only let me take her out once, and I'll never hint a wish to mount her again."

He thought for a little, then he said,—

"Well, Miss Agnes, I'll compromise the matter. I won't let you take her out with the hounds for the first time; but some day, before the season begins, I'll go out riding with you, and you shall ride Lady Flora. I'll see how she behaves, and then decide. But I must append one condition."

"What?"

"I must have Lady Battersby's sanction."

Agnes opened her blue eyes to their widest possible extent. "Mamma's sanction!" she repeated; "what on earth do you want that for?"

"Why, you know—in spite of your independent ways—you are little more than a child, and I should not be justified in letting you do this without your mother's sanction."

Agnes threw back her head and laughed a childlike, merry laugh. "The idea of mamma interfering in my proceedings! what a joke! All right, most reverend rector; don't you be afraid. You shall have her ladyship's permission, duly signed, sealed, and delivered, before this day is over; that is to say, if I can succeed in making her understand you have really made such an extraordinary request. If not, I shall have to trouble you to walk as far as Shrublands, and state your own case."

Harold duly received that evening a note from Lady Battersby, assuring him she had no objection to Agnes riding Lady Flora, if he chose to allow it. Her daughter was so expert a rider, she believed she would be in no danger whatever; and she trusted, for the same reason, there could be none in the permission, to Mr. Seton's very valuable horse.

Harold Seton put the note in his desk, he hardly knew why; but he did know that now he had fairly committed himself he began to wish he had refused the request. He put the subject aside for the moment, however; he had too much to occupy him, and only wrote a note to Agnes to tell her it would probably be a week or two before he should have time to spare her an afternoon.

The new church of which Major Thornton had spoken was the subject on which all his thoughts were for the moment fixed. It was urgently needed. He saw more clearly every day, in spite of all his efforts, that the parish was far too large to be worked from one centre; especially—to indulge in a paradox—from a centre which was situated at its extreme verge; so he turned his attention to the formation of a new district in the lower part of the town. It was the first definite project he had proposed, and it brought out the true spirit of the place. All the different factions agreed upon the advantage of such a division of the parish; but when it came to a demand for active co-operation, they showed instant signs of shuffling, and betrayed their lurking distrust of the man who refused to be the mere representative of a party. They were ready to give their help, but only on condition their own prejudices were the sole standard by which everything was to be measured. When Harold pleaded the almost impossibility of securing the church without the aid of the whole parish, and the consequent necessity of many unimportant points being yielded on all sides, they all cordially agreed to his premises; and

then each faction handed over the whole conclusion to their opponents, and wondered they could not see the obligation laid upon them of sacrificing their prejudices for the sake of so important an advantage.

“He who determines half succeeds.”

So he knew he should carry his point in time. But, in the meanwhile, the weight of a spiritual charge with which no one man could possibly grapple, pressed heavily upon him, and often made him feel rather bitter about his own position. But for that he would have carried his point instantly by building the church himself. But large as his income was for a single man, he could not have accomplished such a task without touching capital, and therefore he was powerless.



CHAPTER XV.

LADY FLORA BRINGS ABOUT THE FULFILMENT OF A PROPHECY.

AT last a lull in the storm of controversy about the church, while some disputed points were submitted for the consideration of the bishop, gave Harold time to think of his promise to Agnes Battersby, and to remember how very near the beginning of the hunting season was ; so he imparted the project to his groom, desiring him privately to get him a side-saddle, that he might try the mare himself. The man looked very grave.

“She'll never carry a lady, sir,” he said.

“Why not? Miss Battersby is a thorough horsewoman.”

“I know that, sir, and she's got a light hand that'll just suit Lady Flora's mouth ; but it's the habit, sir ; she'll never stand that ; she can't bear anything flapping about. If there's a bit of her clothing loose when she's out to exercise she gets in a state.”

“Oh, nonsense !” Harold said, trying as much to reassure himself as his groom. “I'll try her two or three times myself, and then she'll get used to it.”

“Very well, sir, but I do hope you'll choose a still day for Miss Battersby to go out on her. If there's anything like a wind, Heaven help her, and the mare too !”

With this ominous remark the man went off in search of the saddle, and Harold that afternoon made his first attempt. Lady Flora manifested some symptoms of rebellion, but, on the whole, was more submissive than her master expected, and after two or three repetitions of the experiment, one

very still autumn day he told Agnes he would go out with her in the afternoon.

"How about a saddle?" she asked.

"I will send for your own. I should like you to be in your own saddle."

"I believe you think I am going to break my neck," she said, with a laugh; "but I'm not."

He only smiled rather gravely. He did not feel particularly light-hearted.

"I hope, Lady Battersby," he said, as Agnes turned to speak to some one else, "you really have no objection to Miss Battersby riding my horse."

"O dear! not in the least. She can ride anything. I assure you, you need be under no apprehension. It is so very kind of you to allow her. She is in a wild state of delight about it. She is such a perfect child about anything of the kind. I believe she cherishes a secret hope your horse will run away with her. She rather likes being run away with."

Harold superintended the saddling of the mare himself, carefully examining the saddle to see that it fitted perfectly, so that there might be nothing to irritate Lady Flora's excitable temper. Even his groom pronounced it a perfect fit.

"It might have been made for her, sir," he said.

"Very well. Give me your horse, and ride her up to Shrublands yourself. She doesn't much like being led."

Agnes was standing on the steps when they arrived, her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling with excitement. Harold looked at her with more admiration than he had ever felt for her before. Generally when they met, his attention had been occupied with what she said; at that moment he was more in the humour to think of what she was. His taste was not only naturally artistic, it was highly cultivated; and her peculiar charm, that subtle one resultin;

from the natural honesty and truthfulness which banished, of deliberate purpose, from her dress, and, unconsciously to herself, from every line of face or form, the least trace of artifice or mannerism, was not lost on him. Still, as she stood, looking even smaller than she really was, in the close-fitting habit, and he thought what small account the sinewy Lady Flora made of his substantial weight, he began to feel conscious he was unusually nervous.

After a slight show of resistance, which Agnes soothed down with great skill, Lady Flora set off rather quietly.

"Oh, Mr. Seton," Agnes exclaimed, "she's perfection! They say you'll work yourself to death in two years; please, if you do, leave her to me in your will. Does she stand the curb?"

"No, no. Don't try it. Keep her entirely on the snaffle, if you possibly can."

"We'll just see," she said, with a mischievous smile, tightening the curb as she spoke.

With an angry snort Lady Flora threw back her head, and plunged violently.

"Oh, that's charming!" Agnes exclaimed, letting the curb go again. "I——"

She stopped short. Harold came up close beside her, and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Miss Agnes," he said, in a low, stern tone, "if you do the least thing to irritate the mare causelessly, I'll have the saddles changed, and make you ride the groom's horse."

"How'll you manage that?" she asked, in a half-defiant tone.

"By the mere force of superior physical strength, if I deem it necessary," he quietly said.

Agnes coloured and bit her lip. He had never before spoken, to her at least, in such a way. They rode on in silence for a little way, Harold closely watching the mare. Though she seemed disposed to go quietly enough there

was a look about her eye he did not like. At last Agnes turned to him.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Seton," she said; "I ought not to have done it. I know you don't think it quite safe I should ride Lady Flora, and when you've been so kind I ought not to do anything to annoy you. I won't do anything of the sort again. Please forgive me."

The fair childlike face was turned up to his with such a pleading look, that he felt a strong inclination to bend down and kiss it, as he might have done a repentant child; but he only smiled and said,—

"You must remember I feel in a measure answerable for your safety."

"No, no, you are not; I am answerable for that entirely myself. Oh, do look at the rectory and church!" she suddenly broke in; "how charming they look from here! Mr. Seton, you must be a very solitary giant, all by yourself in that big house. You must be dreadfully lonely."

"I have hardly time to think of it."

"But it will be awfully dull in the long winter evenings."

"Perhaps; but I have plenty of occupation. I never spend an idle evening at the rectory. Generally I have business in the way of writing, or sermons to prepare, which fills up my evenings. If not, I go out."

"What an awful worker you are! Do you never indulge in the pleasures of idleness—such as sitting in the dark, doing nothing, and gazing into the fire?"

"Never."

"Well, you try it; it's the jolliest thing possible, particularly when you're tired."

"I had rather not. The same occupations don't suit all people."

She was still looking at the rectory.

"I should mope myself to death in that house," she said.

"I wonder you don't make one of your curates come and live with you."

"I had rather not."

"Don't you like them?"

"Yes, very much; they are all nice fellows. But I prefer having my house to myself."

"I tell you what I really do wish, and that is that you would get married. I should——"

Again she stopped short, intuitively conscious that she had said too much; and just at the moment, not without reason perhaps, Lady Flora plunged a little, and shot ahead.

Harold came up with her again in a few moments.

"I should like to hear the end of that interrupted sentence, Miss Agnes," he said.

"No, please not—I'm very sorry; my tongue is always running away with me; I ought not to have said it."

"Then you must pay the penalty by finishing the sentence against your will. What were you going to say?"

She knew she must yield; but she spoke hesitatingly. "I meant to say I should like it so much better if you were married."

"Why?"

"Because I could see so much more of you."

He was a little puzzled. Why, you told me the other day you were afraid of me."

"O yes, so I am, because I know what you want. But I'm never so happy as when I'm with you."

"Still I don't quite understand what that has to do with my being married."

"Well, I'll tell you. You don't suppose I don't see what goes on round me, do you? and know what you clergymen must think of us girls. I've a bright specimen at home, I can tell you, of sentimental religion, founded upon a whole hecatomb of lipping curates; and many a

time, when I should like to seek you out, I'm afraid, lest you should think I'm in love with you."

"Whatever you might do, I should never suspect that."

"I don't know—because I do love you, Mr. Seton. I don't think I ever had so strong an affection for any one. I never had any one to love. I can't love mamma or Nelly; there's no use making any pretence about it. I've just the sort of feeling for you I think I should have had for poor papa, if I'd ever known him; or for a brother who was a great deal older than I am. You seem so far above me, and yet you bend down to me. But then, you see, you might chance to mistake one kind of feeling for another, and if you were only married it would be all right."

"My dear child," he said, "you are certainly the strangest compound of child and woman I ever came across. But you need have no fear of my mistaking your feelings."

"I don't know; perhaps you wouldn't, you see so deep into one. But then other people might, and I shouldn't quite like that, though I don't generally care what people say. And that's the whole. One thing which makes me hate the thought of turning religious is, that people would say directly, 'Agnes Battersby's grown religious all of a sudden, for love of the rector.' Mr. Seton, I've been doing all kinds of things lately to show people I'm not a bit religious, on purpose. You'll never have a chance of making me religious unless you get married."

"Would you try to be then?"

"No, I won't make any promise. I don't want to be. But I know there never will be any chance unless there is some impassable barrier between us. There, now you know the whole; and her ladyship is getting a little tired of walking so long, so we'll have a spin along this piece of turf."

She had said all she cared to say, and did not return to the subject, but chatted away merrily enough, about a

variety of things ; her fearless indifference to various slight manifestations of temper on the part of Lady Flora the best guarantee possible for her safety, Harold thought. In such a frame of mind there would be little danger of her nerve failing her, even should the mare become unmanageable. That did not seem very probable. He was perfectly certain the occasional fluttering of the habit was keeping her in a perpetual state of suppressed irritation, which might at any moment produce a sudden outburst ; but her rider seemed equal to the circumstances, and likely enough to keep it in check until they reached home. The prospect set him pondering rather anxiously on the future. It would make it rather hard for him to refuse to let the girl take her out with the hounds ; which yet he was little more disposed to allow than he had been from the first—a needless consideration. That question was already irrevocably settled, and the knowledge of that fact was nearer him than he imagined.

They were riding along the broad turf margin of a country lane, with a wide stagnant ditch beside them, half filled with mud and rushes. Suddenly, roused by the sound of the horses' hoofs, a large pig started out of the rushes close to them, and ran grunting across the road, passing almost under their horses' feet. It was too much for the chafed and irritable mare. She stood almost erect for a moment, striking out furiously with her fore-feet ; then coming down again, with a plunge at the reins, which, in spite of all her horsemanship, nearly dragged Agnes out of the saddle, she dashed off down the lane at full speed.

“Head her off, sir !” shouted the groom from behind, but it was useless. Harold's own horse had shied, and Lady Flora passed ahead before he had time to intercept her. He did not dare attempt to overtake her ; he knew far too well the effect any such attempt would have upon the mare. Agnes' merry laugh as she settled herself firmly in

her saddle, seemed to mock at the idea of danger, and side by side Harold and the groom followed Lady Flora's wild and unsteady course.

"My word! she is a rider!" the groom exclaimed. "She'll have her in hand, yet, sir, after a bit, and be all right, so long as she don't come against anything turning on to the high road. She's as cool as a cucumber. Just look, sir, how she's keeping her on the turf, so as she mayn't knock herself to pieces on the hard ground."

It was all lost upon Harold. He was conscious of nothing but the girlish form sitting so firmly in her saddle.

She got safely out of the lane. The turnpike was not far distant. There was no turf margin now, and the sound of thundering hoofs on the hard road brought out the toll-man from his cottage. Harold uttered a suppressed exclamation of horror as he saw him hastily close the massive gate. Almost at the same moment a change came over Agnes.

"Good heavens, sir!" the groom exclaimed, "her nerve is giving way."

It was a terrible sight—the plunging horse—the now nerveless form swaying helplessly in the saddle—and the closed gate they were so rapidly approaching.

Harold dashed forward, exclaiming, "Send her at it, Agnes,—she can do it easily!"

She heard him, and made a feeble attempt to obey. But almost as the mare rose to the leap, she dropped the reins, and slipping helplessly from the saddle, came with violence against the gate, rolled over, and lay motionless in a confused heap on the road.

Harold Seton had her in his arms in a moment, but he shuddered, and turned even whiter than he already was, as he raised her from the ground, and carried her into the cottage.

He sent the groom off instantly for help—they were not

very far from Middleborough—and laid his lifeless burden as comfortably as was possible on the wretched bed which was the only one in the cottage. The toll-man's wife, a coarse, stupid old woman, volunteered her help, but he would not let her come near the girl. With infinite tenderness of touch he unfastened her habit, and loosened everything that might press upon her injured frame; and then, with a terrible dread at his heart, sat down to watch beside her. She breathed, and once or twice a faint moan escaped her, but that was the only sign of life she showed during that agonizing watch, every moment of which seemed an eternity to him.

At last his ear caught the sound of wheels rapidly approaching, and he went to the door. Lady Battersby's carriage drove up to the turnpike, containing only, to his no small satisfaction, a doctor and surgeon, and Lady Battersby's maid.

"Lady and Miss Battersby were out, fortunately, in the pony carriage," the doctor said, in explanation, "so we came off without waiting. Where is she?"

He led them to the inner room, and then sat down before the kitchen fire, and waited, with his head resting on his hands, for their report. Presently the surgeon came out, looking very grave. Harold could not speak, he only looked up.

"I fear she is seriously injured," the surgeon said, in answer to the look, "but we cannot thoroughly ascertain here. We must get her home at once. Come and help me to arrange the carriage as best we can. She must be kept perfectly flat."

They hastily arranged as comfortable a couch as possible, and she was gently laid upon it. Harold's groom had returned, and was holding his horse.

"Will you ride home, sir?" he asked.

"No," interposed the surgeon. "Let your man ride. I

want you to come up behind, and tell me, as we go, exactly what happened."

Harold briefly explained as they drove towards the town. The surgeon shook his head.

"I fear my suspicions are correct, then. Poor child! poor child!"

Harold asked no questions. He could not. He felt too certain what the unnamed suspicion was.

"It was the most providential thing," the surgeon said, "that Dr. Hartley and I were both at hand. He had called me in to a patient of his, and we were just coming away, when we met your stable lad, looking like a ghost. He said Miss Battersby had gone out on your mare, which had just come tearing home riderless. We went up to Shrublands directly, and five minutes after your groom arrived."

Very soon Agnes Battersby, still unconscious, was placed in her own bed, and then, feeling there was nothing more he could do, Harold went home.

"For Heaven's sake," he said to the surgeon, whom he passed in the hall, "let me know as soon as possible what your opinion is."

The surgeon looked sharply at his white face and quivering lip, and thought of some waifs and strays of floating gossip he had come across in Middleborough at various times. He answered very gravely—

"I think we have arrived at our opinion already. In my own mind there is little doubt; still, I should like to see her to-morrow before speaking more decidedly. I will see you in the morning as soon as I have been here."

He watched Harold for a few moments as he walked down the drive, and then returned to the sick room, and joined Doctor Hartley.

"The rector seems terribly cut up," he remarked.

"Natural enough, under the circumstances, surely."

"Yes, under any circumstances ; but I wish I could know what the exact circumstances of the case are before I see him to-morrow."

"What do you mean ?"

"It is commonly reported here they are engaged, or at least likely to be."

"You don't say so ! Poor fellow, I hope it isn't true."

"So do I, most devoutly ; but I should like immensely to arrive at some certainty on the subject."

"It looks strange, certainly, that they should be riding about together in this way ; but then no one ever thought of applying ordinary rules to her, poor child. Ask Major Thornton, he will be sure to know. He is intimately acquainted with both. Poor fellow !" Dr. Hartley repeated again, "I do most sincerely hope there is no truth in the report."



CHAPTER XVI.

ECHOED TEACHING.

THAT was a terrible night to Harold Seton. The greater part of it he spent pacing up and down the library, haunted by two terrible images—Agnes as she had stood on the steps, when he rode up to Shrublands, all radiant with life and health; and Agnes as she had been carried up those steps but a few hours later. He hardly knew which was now the more painful picture. He overwhelmed himself with bitter self-upbraidings. The results of actions throw a strange light upon them; not always, perhaps, a trustworthy one. And viewed by that light, he unhesitatingly condemned his own conduct in ever having yielded to her wish.”

Very soon after breakfast Major Thornton came in.

“This is an awful business, Seton,” he said. “But, my dear fellow! how ghastly ill you look!”

“Never mind me. Have you heard anything this morning?”

“Yes. I’ve just come from Shrublands. Sent to you by the doctors.”

“What do they say?”

“They startled me, Seton, with a question I did not expect, and could not answer. But I should like to have it answered before I tell you more.”

“What do you mean?”

“They both have the idea that you and that poor girl are engaged.”

“Pshaw! nonsense!”

"Really, Seton? Is there really nothing of the kind?"

"Nothing,—never was, and never will be."

"Thank God for that. It would have been a most painful task I have before me, had there been."

It was a painful enough disclosure as it was. Harold's own worst fear—the fear which had come over him the moment he felt the way in which she lay in his arms—was fully confirmed. Her back was fatally injured, and the lower limbs hopelessly paralyzed in consequence. She might live for years, but only as a helpless cripple, never able to move from her couch. There was no room for doubt. The doctors had telegraphed for an eminent surgeon the evening before. He had arrived during the night, had examined the girl, and unhesitatingly confirmed the opinion they had already formed.

The drops were standing thick upon Harold Seton's forehead as Major Thornton spoke.

"And it is all my doing," he muttered, in a low hoarse tone.

"Nonsense, Seton! you must not think that. I am not exactly what you would call a religious man, but even I can see that if ever there was a case in which the hand of God was distinctly visible, it is in this. Anything so unaccountable I never heard in my life."

"In what way?"

"In every way. There's nothing to account for the accident. Why, I've seen a vicious brute that girl used to ride rear and fall back with her, and she slip out of the way, and be on her feet, and holding the horse's head, before any one had time to reach her; and mount again, too, as soon as the saddle was changed, laughing at the whole thing as a good joke. And here she loses her nerve, all of a sudden, at the mere sight of a closed turnpike gate. There must be some reason for it. But unless she is able to explain it herself, it will be a mystery for ever."

"Does she suffer much?"

"A good deal at present,"—Major Thornton did not care to say how much,—“but that, the doctors say, will not be permanent. As soon as she has got over the immediate results of the injury, they hope the actual pain she will have to endure will be but trifling. But it is a frightful affair.”

"Does she know——" He could not finish the question.

"Not yet, they have not dared to tell her. Besides, she seems still very confused; hardly clear as to what happened. She has been muttering something about a prophecy; but they can't understand what she means."

"How do her mother and sister take it?"

Major Thornton shrugged his shoulders. "Lady Battersby has taken a deal of sal volatile, and I believe Miss Battersby has been in periodical fits of hysterics ever since. Lady Battersby wants to see you, Seton, my dear fellow; I fear the task of telling the poor girl the truth will be laid upon you."

"Were you requested to ask me to undertake it?"

"No, by no means. Nothing positive has been said; but I can see they have it in their minds. It's rather too bad. But I suspect that is what Lady Battersby wants you for."

"I am ready, if it is advisable. But I should think the doctors ought to do it."

"They haven't the courage, my dear fellow, that's the plain truth. However, there's no question of telling her at the moment; but I imagine Lady Battersby wants to get you to promise to undertake the task."

It was just what Lady Battersby did want; and to pour out, as well, a long description of the dreadful suffering this awful accident had caused herself; and to claim the rector's sympathy for her own acute distress; and to beg him to remonstrate with Miss Battersby, and try and induce her to exercise a little self-control. She got all she wanted, and

declared herself much tranquillized by Mr. Seton's visit, that he was really invaluable in times of affliction, and seemed a most kind-hearted man. He positively looked quite ill, after hearing her account of all she had suffered during the night.

There were plenty of other people, too, wanted the rector that day. And over and over again did he calmly repeat the terrible tale, while every nerve was quivering; and listen patiently to all the varied comments, and assurances that no one could possibly attach any blame to him. He was sharply criticised himself, and generally pronounced to look more white and stony than was naturally to be expected, unless he had some private reason for feeling more strongly about the accident than was admitted.

Mrs. Thornton at least spared him the painful repetition. She had heard the story from her husband, and knew, which others did not as yet, the fearful future fate in store for poor Agnes. She only drew upon Harold for sympathy with her own distress, which was really sincere.

Evelyn Macdonald came into the drawing-room, rather a rare occurrence with her, and listened silently to all that passed. Harold hardly noticed her till just as he was leaving. Then she came up to him.

"Mr. Seton," she said, "who is with her?"

The tone made him look at her. She was very pale, and there was a depth of expression in her large dark eyes which gave positive beauty to her face.

"A first-rate surgical nurse has arrived and taken charge of her. There is no one else, poor girl. Her mother and sister are worse than useless."

Evelyn clasped her hands tightly together. "Do you think she would let me go to her?" she asked, in a tremulous voice.

"My dear Eva," Mrs. Thornton interposed, "it is not to be thought of. You are much too young."

Evelyn turned to her with almost stern decision in her manner.

"No I am not, aunt Louisa. I don't suppose you ever knew it, but papa's death was caused by a bad fall when riding. His back was very much injured, and I nursed him, and the doctor said I had done it very well. I nursed him for six weeks, so I do know something about it."

"But, my dear, such an interruption to your studies, which are so important at your age! and I really don't think it is necessary."

A half-indignant, half-scornful flush passed rapidly across the girl's face, but she made no answer. She only turned an almost pleading look on Harold. In those few moments the remembrance of what poor Agnes had herself said about Evelyn crossed his mind, and he answered Mrs. Thornton,—

"Miss Macdonald's proposal certainly merits consideration, Mrs. Thornton. I think it is very possible she might be an immense comfort to Miss Battersby. I can easily ascertain, and should it prove so, I hope you will not refuse your consent."

"Oh, certainly not, if you think it well. But I must say I think Eva too young, myself."

Evelyn followed him to the door. "Thank you, Mr. Seton," she said quietly. "I could help the nurse, I know, and I think I could help poor Agnes to try and bear it. I do care very much for her."

And yet she had shown a degree of reserve which not even the frank, open-hearted Agnes Batterby had been able to overcome. Harold began to regard her with some curiosity.

Evelyn's suggestion was very cordially received at Shrublands. Lady Battersby would be most thankful if Mrs. Thornton would let her come, and Agnes had taken such a fancy to her when first she saw her, she was sure it would be a comfort to her to have her there. So without

further discussion Evelyn herself quietly suspended all her masters, and took up her abode at Shrublands.

Harold mechanically went on with the routine of his daily work, but all the spirit was gone from it for the time. Upon him, like a dead weight, was resting the thought of the ordeal before him, in his first interview with Agnes, and the terrible disclosure he would have to make. How would she be able to endure it? There were many points of resemblance between the fate which had befallen her and his own; but he could hardly hope—at least, as yet—to teach her, as Padre Felipe had taught him, to hear, amid the storm, the Master's voice calling her to follow him; and how otherwise could she ever find strength to bear her cross?

A fortnight passed after the accident before the doctors would allow the poor girl to hear the truth. Every day Harold had been at Shrublands, and every day amidst the endless lamentations of the weak-minded mother, had been sounded praises of Evelyn Macdonald. They never could have got on without her. Agnes would hardly bear her to be out of her sight. It was quite inconceivable that a girl of her age could have so much firmness and good sense, united with such gentleness; with much more in the same strain. And it was some slight consolation to him to know that his intervention had been the means of placing Evelyn in such a position.

At last the dreaded moment came. Agnes was stronger, and it was impossible to conceal the truth from her any longer. Lady Battersby sent for Harold to come and consult with her about it.

“Oh, dear Mr. Seton, I do wish it was over. I can't tell you how I dread it.”

“So do I, for your daughter,” he said, with a touch of irony in his tone.

“O yes, of course, for her and for myself too. I feel

quite unnerved. I really think you had better see Miss Macdonald, and arrange it with her. I feel quite unequal even to speak of it."

Evelyn came, and heard what was under discussion.

"Yes," she said, "I am sure it is best she should know it. She does not suspect the truth; but I am sure she is beginning to think she is more hurt than she has been told, and that the thought is fretting her."

"Then do settle with Mr. Seton about telling her, my dear."

"Settle with Mr. Seton!" she repeated, with some surprise in her tone.

"Yes, my dear; Mr. Seton has kindly promised to break the dreadful truth to her, poor darling."

Evelyn's colour deepened. "Do you wish to tell her?" she asked Harold, in a low tone.

He shook his head. "Can you ask the question under the circumstances? I was implored to promise to do it."

Her lip curled. "It was too cruel," she said; "you of all men.—Mr. Seton and I think it better I should tell Agnes, Lady Battersby," she added. "I will do it this afternoon."

"Just as you please, my dear."

"Then I will go back to Agnes now." And she rose, with a slight sign to Harold to follow her. They crossed the hall together.

"It was a cruel shame to ask it of you," she said, "but I do dread it, Mr. Seton. She has said once or twice she should like to see you soon. I think perhaps she will want you to come directly, then. You will stay at home, won't you? and come at once if I send?"

"Instantly."

She went up-stairs, and he watched her, asking himself the question Agnes had asked him,— "Could she really be only fifteen?"

He waited at the rectory, a weary waiting. He could do nothing but wander restlessly about the library. At last the door suddenly opened, and Evelyn herself stood before him, pale and breathless, with evident traces of tears on her face.

"Come directly," she faltered.

Harold obeyed without asking any question, and they walked up to Shrublands without a word on either side. It was plainly as much as Evelyn could do to keep back her own sobs. She was but young, after all, and it had been too much for her.

"Oh, Mr. Seton," she faltered, as they entered the house, "it has been so dreadful, oh so dreadful! Go up to her room directly; she is wild to see you. She would have me go to you myself."

With perfect outward calmness Harold entered the sick room, the nurse passing out as he did so. The sight that met his eyes sent a sharp pang through him. Agnes Battersby, wasted to a shadow, was restlessly tossing her head about on the pillow, her fair hair flung away in a dishevelled mass over the back of the bed, her eyes dilated, and her cheeks burning with fever, and worse than all, with a heart rending look of despairing misery in her face. She greeted Harold with a low moaning wail, and stretching out her arms towards him, made a fruitless attempt to rise from her pillow. He bent over her, and took the burning hands in his; but she drew them away, and before he knew what she intended, clasped them round his neck, and tried to draw herself up to him. Very gently he released himself, and, sitting down on the bed, raised her from the pillow, and drawing her to him, rested her head upon his shoulder, and held her closely in his arms. He did not speak; he could not; it was such a piteous sight—that helplessly, hopelessly crippled form, out of which such radiant life and health had been so cruelly crushed.

She clung convulsively to him. She had acted from pure instinct, and he understood it, though at the moment he was not conscious that he did, or why he had so intuitively responded to the mute appeal. There was deep pathos in it. The action was but the outward visible sign of what could not be more touchingly expressed. It was the appeal of a crushed and broken spirit writhing in its weakness and misery, to a strong, brave one, for sympathy and support. She felt the quiet strength beside her, and nestled down on his broad chest, as if the mere resting there brought her some relief. There had been a terrible scene when she learnt the truth, and Evelyn was powerless then. She wanted something stronger to cling to, and almost frantically implored that Harold Seton might be brought; hardly ceasing her entreaties for a moment till his arms were round her.

She lay there moaning out incoherent words, broken by convulsive sobs, without his moving or speaking. It taxed even his strong will to preserve outward calmness, but he did it, for her sake. After a while he felt she was growing quieter, and when at last her sobs had ceased, and her breathing become less hurried and irregular, he gently laid her down again, and sitting down beside the bed, with her hand still clasped in his, murmured a few soothing words.

"Oh, I can't—I can't bear it," she faltered. "Not eighteen yet, and I may live for years! It's too cruel—I haven't deserved this. You said it would be a sharp stroke, but this is too cruel."

He did not understand what she meant by the sharp stroke, he had a good deal yet to learn about the accident; but he did understand, well enough, the clamorous rebellion that was rising against her fate. He did not attempt any platitudes about resignation. He wanted all the bitterness to find a vent, and be poured out, before any attempt was made to heal the wound. He only sought to soothe her.

"No, no," she repeated, in answer to his words, "I can't bear it. You said it would be a sharp stroke—but it won't do the work; it can't; my heart is so full of wicked, bitter thoughts; no good ones can come there."

"What did I say about a sharp stroke?" he asked.

"Don't you remember? Oh, I remember,—I have tried to forget, but I couldn't;—that's what's laid me here. That day, in the churchyard, under the limes, you said if I didn't seek a holier life I should be driven to it by a sharp stroke. I tried to forget those words, but I never could, and it's they have laid me here. It's God's doing, Mr. Seton; but I can't submit, I can't!"

He had forgotten the words, but he remembered now; and strange suspicions were beginning to rise.

"What have those words to do with this?" he asked.

"Oh, it was they did it. Listen; I'll try and tell you. It is God's work. I tried to forget those words, but I couldn't; they haunted me. I didn't want to be religious, but I couldn't shake them off. I wouldn't listen when you were preaching, lest something else should strike me. But I knew I was turning wilfully away from that life, and hardening my heart, and I wasn't happy, though I wouldn't allow to myself I was not. I wasn't a bit frightened when the mare ran away; it was nothing to me; and when we came out of the lane I was only thinking that if I didn't succeed in pulling her up soon she'd knock herself to pieces on the hard road. But," and she shuddered, "all of a sudden, when I saw the man shut the gate, those words of yours flashed like fire through my brain, and I knew the hour was come. I thought I was going to be killed, to punish me for hardening my heart, and I knew I wasn't fit to die. I just heard you call to me to send her at it, and I tried; and then I knew no more. But oh! I can't, I can't bear it!"

An awestruck feeling came over Harold as she spoke.

He felt more strongly than ever that it was he who had laid her there for life—at least, that he had been the instrument; yet now he did not dare dispute the fiat.

She had grown quieter, but he saw it was partly from sheer exhaustion, and that he must not prolong the conversation.

“I must not let you talk more now, my child,” he said “you are quite exhausted. We will discuss all this tomorrow, if you are able. Only don’t feel afraid at your own rebellious feelings. It is not at the first moment a blow falls that we feel the strength is given to bear it. Perfect submission then comes from apathy, not from real resignation. Do not fear, however rebellious you may feel. God’s ways are not our ways. He is leading you to Himself by the path He sees fit, and even though it may be through the fire of fierce rebellion, He will lead you safely home at last to perfect peace, if only your faith does not fail.”

It was an echoed teaching, applied by the light of his own deep experience. The solitary monk far away in his lonely convent, and faithful, amidst all his errors, to the light he had received, would have some share in training another servant for the Master’s service.

She wanted to speak, but he would not let her.

“No, my child, no more now. Only think of that until I come again. Will you promise?”

“I’ll try.”

“And you will succeed. You must not say one word more; you are more exhausted now than you ought to be. I am not leaving you alone: I leave you in the care of Him who has felt every earthly pang, and will not forsake the wandering child He has stricken in infinite love.”

He rose as he spoke. Agnes did not answer, but her eyes were fixed on him with a wistful, imploring gaze. Her face was full of pain and trouble still, but it had not the wild, despairing look it had worn when he first entered. He

stood silently beside her for a few moments. Then, laying both hands upon her head, he pronounced a blessing on her.

"You will come to-morrow, will you not?" she murmured.

"That must depend in a measure on yourself, my child. You must not be excited in any way. If you will try and keep as quiet as you can, I will come."

"Yes, come; please come!" she entreated, clasping her wasted hands imploringly together. "I can never, never bear it without your help. Please promise you will come!"

"I will come."

A faint shadowy smile just flitted across her face for a moment, and, bending down, he kissed her forehead very gravely and tenderly, and left her.

Evelyn was anxiously awaiting him.

"She is quieter now," he said, "but it is partly from sheer exhaustion. I think she should have something. Go and see. And then tell her I told you to leave her alone for a little."

Evelyn came back to him in a few minutes.

"Oh, Mr. Seton," she said, "what have you done to her? It is like magic."

"How so?"

"She is so quiet to what she was. Oh, it was so dreadful when I first told her! I thought it would have killed her. And now she is lying quite quiet, and she just smiled faintly when she saw me. It is the first time I have seen her smile since the accident. How have you managed to soothe her so completely?"

He did not answer the question—the subtle influence might not be defined; it was hardly possible even to analyze it in thought. He scarcely knew himself how he had done it.

"It will not last," he said; "you must be prepared for that. She is partly quiet from exhaustion now, and at best it is but a temporary lull. She is not prepared to submit

yet. Poor child!" and a dreamy, absent look came over his face as he spoke, "she will have some very fierce conflicts to pass through before she will learn what real submission is."

"But if she gets into such a state again what shall I do with her, Mr. Seton? I don't know enough to understand how to treat her, and there is no one here to guide me."

"It is hard for you, certainly," he said, thoughtfully. "You must, of course, as a mere medical precaution, try and keep her as quiet as possible; but I fear you must leave the mind alone. Let her say what she likes. Never mind how wild, or even impious, her words may seem. Above all, let nothing induce you to preach resignation to her. You will drive her nearly mad if you do. It is the one thing which I believe, at this moment, she could not bear. I think that is all the direction I can give you, Miss Macdonald. I need not add that if you think it desirable you can send for me at any hour, either of the day or night."

"Oh, thank you; it will be such a comfort to feel I can do that. I never had to deal with mental distress before, and I feel so helplessly inexperienced."

"You will learn now what may be of untold value to you in after life," he said, as he went down-stairs.

Half an hour afterward Evelyn crept cautiously back to the sick room. Agnes was sleeping quietly.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN GETS THE BETTER OF THE RECTOR.

HAROLD SETON'S assertion that Agnes Battersby was but lulled into temporary tranquillity was abundantly verified before long. He had exercised no magical influence, although his power, for the moment, had seemed almost like it. In her case it was not only his perfect knowledge of how to deal with a blighted life which gave him such power ; though now, for the first time, he strove to call up, in imagination, some of those dark hours and desperate conflicts he had known when he was struggling against his own fate, that he might analyze the workings of his mind, and gain thereby wisdom for the sake of the poor sufferer clinging so helplessly to him for support. The circumstances of the girl's past history gave him peculiar influence with her. Her life had been one of entire neglect. She had never known her father. He had died six months before her birth. Her thoroughly heartless, worldly mother had never forgiven the poor child for proving another girl, and thereby not only allowing the title and estates to pass to a distant relative, but also materially lessening the fortune her elder sister would otherwise have had. Eleanor Battersby was several years older than Agnes, and was her mother's pet ; so the unwelcome second daughter was only regarded as a useless encumbrance, and though not actually unkindly treated, was entirely neglected. Her disposition was little more to her mother's taste than her sex. She very early showed signs of a daring independence and blunt straightforwardness of

character very little suited to the social atmosphere around her. The little bold, fearless child was of course the darling of the servants, both in the house and out ; and, in consequence, her childhood was chiefly spent in the kitchen and stables. Really clever, and a quick observer, she soon began, as she grew up, to see through all the tinsel and glitter of the hollow, artificial life in which her lot had been cast ; and her honest, truthful nature recoiled from it with a feeling of contempt which rapidly sent her rather to the opposite extreme, and would have done so still more, but for that very truthfulness which would not, even in a recoil, let her assume more than she really felt. Through her whole life she had never had a single feeling of sincere respect or affection aroused in her, until she met Harold Seton. Her quick observation had made her detect, the first time she saw him, that he was different from any one she had ever known. She respected him from the moment she heard him so gravely rebuke the sentiments which had so often excited her own wrath. Her respect soon deepened into profound admiration ; his evident interest in her drew her towards him, while the quiet respect with which he treated her forced her back from the careless familiarity of manner with which she was accustomed to treat every one, and gave her the first lesson she had ever had in self-respect. She very soon learned really to love him, though the feeling was, as she herself had said, only such a one as she might have felt for a father or an elder brother. Would such a feeling be a safe one for her ? Alas ! that question was sadly answered now ; answered almost before Harold Seton had had time, after hearing her own account of her feelings, to put it to himself. He had won his influence, and he might safely use it. A far more impassable barrier than she had ever dreamed could exist was between them, for ever, in this world. The most determined disbeliever in Platonics could hardly have seen danger in such a friendship.

Very sorely she needed all his influence could do for her; doomed to pass, in a moment, from singularly perfect health, and a buoyancy of animal spirits fitting her peculiarly for keen enjoyment of all the pleasures of active life and country sports, to utter helplessness and dependence; to the life of a paralyzed invalid, always helpless, sometimes suffering terribly, and knowing that though there might be alleviation there was no hope. It was a terrible prospect, and she was no miraculous instance of sudden and perfect resignation. She rebelled wildly against her fate,—at times with bursts of hysterical sobbing, at others turning hard, sullen, and defiant. Once Evelyn had to send for Harold late at night, on an occasion when Lady Battersby, coming in, as usual, to wish her daughter good night, and finding her restless and irritable, had thought it necessary to impress upon her the duty of resignation to the will of God. Such an outburst was the result, that it was long before even the rector could soothe her to anything like calmness.

He saw her almost every day. She was, for the time, his special charge, and he would have allowed no amount of work to have interfered with his visits to her. Middleborough had much to say upon the subject, but for once the gossip was not ill-natured. Beyond her own circle she had been a general favourite, and her terrible fate was a source of universal regret. Their tongues were busy with the past, not the present. They were quite sure there had been something going on, even if she and Mr. Seton had not been actually engaged. She certainly seemed a strange choice for such a grave, earnest, thoughtful man; still she would have been a good wife to him, and it made the accident much more dreadful to think of. Harold heard it all with a smile, little thinking the day would come when he would rejoice in the prevalence of such an idea.

Weeks slipped away, and he was beginning to see signs that all his patient, unwearied efforts had not been thrown

away. Through all that time Agnes had seen him only as her spiritual pastor, striving unceasingly to lead her, directly or indirectly, according as she could bear it, to the perfect peace of unwavering submission to the will of God ; and to teach her, by faith, to discern the infinite love which had laid the cross upon her. What the mere feelings of the man were she did not learn until the first day she was moved to a couch which had been expressly prepared for her. She implored Harold to move her for the first time ; she dreaded it, and she clung as instinctively, in such a case, to his great physical strength, as she had done before to his mental power.

“ And this is my future home,” she said, as he laid her on the couch.

“ Not your home, only the scene of your earthly pilgrimage.”

She smiled rather sadly. “ I cannot always say, yet,” she said, in a low tone, “ ‘ God’s will be done.’ But I do try, Mr. Seton, oh so hard ; and the dark hours don’t come so often now. But oh ! it all seems so long ago, as if years had passed. How long is it ? ”

“ Ten weeks.”

“ Only ten weeks ! it seems like ten years.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she suddenly asked, “ What became of Lady Flora ? Was she hurt ? ”

“ Hurt ! No. Confound her, I wish she had broken her neck.”

“ Mr. Seton ! ”

She was too much astonished to say more. Such words were strange enough from him, without the bitter vehemence of his tone. It was an outburst of nature : one which she could hardly, perhaps, under any circumstances, have entirely understood. The question had caught him off his guard, it was so unexpected ; and the bitter answer told of the indescribable pain to a strong, brave man, of such a tem-

perament as his, in the sight of a woman physically injured in so fatal a manner.

He was little less astonished than herself at the words which had escaped him. "I did not mean to speak so strongly," he said, "but I cannot bear to think of her when I look at you."

"What! are you going to give me a lesson in rebellion?"

"God forbid. But you cannot quite understand all my feelings on the subject, my child; and I cannot bear to think of that vicious brute. I all but ordered her to be shot."

"Oh, Mr. Seton! you did not do it?"

"No. I was so conscious the feeling was merely revengeful, that I checked it, even towards an animal; but I could never have ridden her again. I have sent her away."

"I am so sorry. You liked riding her, I know."

"I never should again. I believe I should have positively ill-treated her, and she would assuredly have broken my neck if I had."

"Oh, then, I am glad she is gone. I could not do without you,—at least, not yet. Mr. Seton, I don't want you to marry now. You wouldn't be able to spare me so much time."

There was something still of her old frankness about her, only its bluntness was softening down.

"I never shall marry."

"Never!"

"No, never. You need have no fear that any domestic ties will ever curtail the time I have to spare to you."

She looked at him for a moment as though she had something more she would have said; but then she changed the subject and she never again mentioned it to him.

Evelyn Macdonald had resigned her charge of Agnes and returned home, but the greater part of her time was still spent at Shrublands—an arrangement of which Mrs. Thornton entirely approved. She could not get on with her niece,

and even Major Thornton was forced to admit she had not verified his prediction, that she would be just like other girls when she got used to her position. She was very quiet, very obedient, and perfectly considerate of her aunt's wishes, but entrenched behind a barrier of cold reserve which nothing seemed able to overcome.

She was really a serious source of distress to Mrs. Thornton. She did not care about having her there, but as she was there, she would have liked her to be happy, and that the girl certainly was not. Mrs. Thornton in despair at last took counsel with her old and faithful servant, Dawson.

"What can make her so strange, Dawson?"

"I can't think, ma'am."

"Is she the same to you?"

"Oh dear no, ma'am. She's quite different to me, and to all the servants. They are all devoted to Miss Eva, and so are the poor people she visits. I can't think what it is, but I'm sure Miss Eva isn't happy, though she often says how kind you and her uncle are. I'm sure she often cries a great deal at night. I've often seen her eyes quite red when I've gone to her in the morning."

"It is very extraordinary. So like her poor mother, and yet so different."

"Do you think, ma'am, Miss Eva knows anything about that, and frets about it?"

"No, certainly not. I have sounded her more than once, and am certain she knows nothing."

"Then I can't think what it can be, unless she was very fond of her papa, and frets after him."

"I don't think it looks like that. I do wish she would change," Mrs. Thornton sighed, in a plaintive tone.

She was beginning to feel a little indignant, however. Dawson's remarks seemed to show that Evelyn's cold reserve was kept especially for Major Thornton and herself; and as she reflected over this she began to look upon her

as somewhat culpable in the matter. Then a brilliant idea presented itself; one which seemed, at least, very brilliant to Mrs. Thornton. She would get the rector to remonstrate with her niece.

This idea she took the first fitting opportunity of communicating to him, beginning with a long description of her troubles and annoyances, and ending with a request that he would speak to Evelyn about her conduct. To the first part of her harangue Harold listened with grave attention; but when she came to her concluding request, she received a much more abrupt and unqualified refusal thereof than she was at all accustomed to receive from him.

"My dear Mrs. Thornton, I really cannot undertake to do anything of the kind."

"You cannot!" she repeated.

"Certainly not. If there was anything tangible to be blamed in your niece I should feel it my duty to speak to her about it, at your request. But the real fact is, I have not the courage to attack Miss Macdonald in the way you suggest."

"Not the courage! Really, Mr. Seton, you must forgive me if I say that borders on the ridiculous. You, a man universally respected in a large and important parish like this, and carrying the weight you do; and she a mere child, not sixteen yet."

He laughed to himself. "I am afraid it is rather a humiliating confession, or at least that it must seem so to you; but truth compels me to admit there is no single individual among my parishioners I would not rather attack than your niece. You must remember, years are in reality a very false test of age."

Mrs. Thornton could not see it. "I think you might do something with her. I am sure she respects you; and just look how much you have done with poor dear Agnes."

"I had her confidence before I made the attempt; nor

could you well find two girls more entirely different. Besides, Mrs. Thornton, the attempt would be useless. I should immediately receive such a rebuff from Miss Macdonald as would be neither encouraging nor agreeable. Nor is this my only reason for refusing your request. I do not consider it either a safe or desirable exercise of my official duties to seek to instal myself in the position of confidential spiritual director to all the young ladies of my flock. Such a post requires a much older man than myself."

"I am sure no one here ever remembers that you are so young. I should never have thought of proposing such a step to most men of your age, but you are such an exception to all rules."

"I cannot forget the fact myself, Mrs. Thornton, and must really decline the task, and recommend you to trust to time. Do you not think, perhaps, Miss Macdonald knows something of her mother's sad history, and that that may cause her unhappiness?"

"That is just what Dawson asked me, but I am sure she does not. I have said various things to her on purpose to try and find out, and I am sure she suspects nothing."

In spite of his refusal to interfere with Evelyn Macdonald, Harold could not but regard her with both curiosity and interest. He had been not a little struck by the quiet firmness with which she had carried her point of going to nurse Agnes Battersby, and during her attendance upon the poor girl he had seen her in a very different light from that in which she usually appeared. Her evident indignation on hearing that he had been asked to break the fatal truth to Agnes, was not the only evidence she had given of a far keener sympathy with his own peculiarly painful position with respect to the accident, than had been manifested by any one else, and of feelings both deep and strong enough entirely to overcome for the time her general reserve. But the moment she returned home again she seemed

to congeal into her usual coldness—usual, at least, with the one exception of Agnes Battersby, to every one of her own rank in life. To those beneath her she was entirely different. She had, very soon after she came to Middleborough, told Harold she had been accustomed to visit poor people in Scotland, and liked to do it; and asked him to tell her who she might visit in Middleborough; and often enough, from those he had placed upon her list, he heard enthusiastic praises of dear Miss Macdonald, and how gentle and kind she was. It really seemed as if the girl had two distinct characters, and Harold had no great difficulty in deciding himself which was the real and which the assumed one; though why she should assume one at all was a mystery not so easy of solution, and one he had no intention of making an attempt to solve. Young as she was, he had far too profound a respect for her, to endeavour to intrude himself uninvited into her confidence.

His hands were very full, and his thoughts too, that winter; full enough to make him start when Agnes one day told him it was five months since her last fatal ride, and quite a year since he had come to Middleborough. She still often needed a good deal of his time, and his difficulties seemed rather to increase than to decrease. The first effect of vigorous cleaning after long neglect is to make a tremendous dust, and the evils which such neglect had allowed to flourish so rankly in Middleborough were not to be energetically attacked without a violent disturbance of the social atmosphere resulting as the first consequence. Sometimes he almost stood aghast himself, and painfully pondered the question whether he had not set to work the wrong way, when so many storms and commotions seemed the only present results of his labours. Then, superadded to it all, he had had a refractory curate on his hands; one something like what the bishop had feared when he first heard of Harold himself—a young enthusiast with a mission,

—and very heavily the young visionary had contrived to increase the weight of his rector's anxieties and cares.

"Have I really been here a year?" he said.

"Yes, really."

"And you on your couch five months? Agnes, it does not seem possible."

"There's something more impossible come to pass."

"What is that?"

"That I have learned in five months to be resigned to the knowledge that my whole life is to be spent on this couch, and am happier than I was before I was laid on it. It is your doing, Mr. Seton."

"Not mine, Agnes."

"Yes, in the sense I mean. You know how I mean it. You taught me how to bear it."

"I think, then, it is about the only piece of work I have successfully accomplished since I came," he said, almost sadly.

She looked up anxiously at him. "You are not getting down-hearted, surely. You will do so much here, only you must wait patiently for the harvest."

"Agnes, I shall never see it; perhaps you will." He spoke very gravely, almost solemnly.

"Never see it! why not?"

"How long will it be before the harvest?"

She shook her head. "A long time—years, I fear. Remember you have thirty years' neglect to undo before you can really begin your work."

"Will you say ten or twelve years?"

"Yes, I think perhaps it may be as long as that. But that is not so tremendous to a man of your age."

"At the rate I am living now, I shall not be alive," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Seton! don't say that! If it is so, you have no right to work so hard. You have no right to work yourself to death."

“ I do not do it deliberately, child. It is forced upon me. I spare myself as much as I can, on principle, not from inclination. I do believe that the reformation of Middleborough is my appointed work ; but I do believe also that the man who accomplishes that work will do so at the cost of his own life, and will not see the results of his labours.”

Something of the utter loneliness of his life was gone when he could talk to any one in that strain. He did to Agnes sometimes, and he felt the relief. The conviction had been growing upon him for some time, that the actual amount of work forced upon him, if he would make his parish what he hoped to see it, would wear him out in about ten or twelve years. And all the more strongly did he feel that he had found the work for which he had been specially trained. Ten or twelve years at most—and little likely to pass less rapidly than that one had done. It was a thought which, after that conversation with Agnes, often stimulated his energies when they seemed inclined to flag, and sent him back to his work with renewed vigour.



CHAPTER XVIII.

AGNES BATTERSBY IS MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN MRS. THORNTON.

HAROLD SETON'S solitude at the rectory was actually enlivened that spring by a visitor. Ralph Seton announced his intention of visiting him, partly, he said, in order to afford him the benefit of his advice in parochial management, partly to consult him on some business matters. What the business might be, Harold could not imagine. Ralph had made one or two attempts to induce him to interfere in the management of the Rookwood property, but had found them such fruitless labour, that he had yielded the point, declaring he would back his cousin for obstinacy against the whole world, when he got an idea into his head. Really attached to Ralph though Harold was, he hardly felt as if he could sincerely welcome him. He preferred keeping everything connected with that side of his life's history as much in the dark as possible.

"Is it any use to consult you about renewals of leases at Rookwood, Harold?" Ralph asked, as they were sitting in the library, the evening of his arrival.

"No, it is not the least use. I should have thought you might have known that, without asking the question."

"I suspected as much; but I do wish you would decide one or two points yourself."

"I will not; and I fairly tell you, Ralph, if you only came here to worry me with such questions I had much rather you had stayed away."

Ralph laughed. "You are frank, at any rate. No one

can accuse you of carrying tact to the verge of duplicity. No, my dear fellow, that suggestion was a mere accidental feature in the case. The business that brings me here is entirely personal. I want to talk to you about Arthur."

"What about him?"

"He is bent upon following your example, and going into the Church."

"Then let him have his own way, by all means. But he is surely very young to make a choice."

"He is seventeen."

"So much as that. Is he really?"

"He is indeed. He is only a year younger than Charlie, you know. I must say I wish he had not set his heart upon this."

"Why?"

"Because the Church is a bad profession for a man to get on in, unless he happens to have some near relative on the bench. It is all your doing, Harold. Arthur always had an enthusiastic admiration for you, from the time he was in petticoats; and I believe it is only because you are a parson that he wants to be one."

"You don't know what you are talking about, Ralph," Harold said, very earnestly. "Don't attempt to thwart the boy on such a point."

"I have no intention. I must say he has taken after his model in one point. He is uncommonly hard to move when he has once made up his mind. But I do wish he had taken a fancy for some other profession."

"It's nonsense for you to talk in that way, Ralph. You'll be able well enough to make your younger children in a measure independent of the professions they may choose."

"That is all very fine in theory, my good fellow; but I never could get you to look at that subject from any point of view save your own, and little wonder, I must admit. I grant my position, in that respect, is not so painful as yours,

but it is little more pleasant ; and its glorious instability certainly does not incline me to make calculations as to what I can leave my younger children. Still Arthur must have his way ; I would never cross a boy about his profession, especially where the Church is in question. What I want to know is, will you give him a title ? ”

“ Six years hence. Six and one, seven—ten—twelve. ”

“ What are you calculating, Harold ? ”

He smiled. “ I’ll give him a title with pleasure, if you wish it. But you are looking a long way forward. ”

“ I want the boy to know there is such a chance. If he is to enter the Church I would like him to have every inducement to do it heart and soul ; and nothing could be so strong a one as to know he was to work under you. ”

“ Ralph, do those boys know ? ”

“ Not a word. Not a soul, save myself, has the least suspicion of the truth. I would not for the world that Charlie, especially, should know it. He is going to the bar, and will do well enough. But he is not the sort of fellow to work hard without some provocation. I should never be able to get him to face all the drudgery did he suspect his possible prospects. They regard you as something of a religious enthusiast, and I have left them to that impression. ”

“ That is well. Arthur shall come to me, and I will give him the best training I can. Perhaps, in six years, things may change. As it is at present, I cannot say. I think this the best possible training school for a curate. It is rather a dangerous experiment to throw a young fellow, at three-and-twenty, into a hotbed of party spirit and religious dissension. ”

“ I’d risk it, ” was Ralph’s laconic answer. He did not say why ; but he had had some discussion on that very point with the bishop, whom he had met. The bishop had watched Middleborough very closely that year, and warmly congratulated Ralph on the chance of sending his son there to learn his work ; adding, that if there was one thing which he

deemed even a greater advantage to his diocese than Harold's presentation to the living of Middleborough, it was the fact of his independent fortune enabling him to keep so large a staff of curates ; for that such a training school was as rare as it was invaluable.

" If he remains at Middleborough as long as ten or twelve years," was the bishop's concluding remark, " my diocese will feel the effects for many generations."

One condition Harold appended to his promise ; that Arthur should spend a good deal of his time with him at the rectory in future. If he was really to train the boy, it were well the training should begin at once, and many visions began to float indistinctly through his mind. The idea that ten or twelve years would be the limit of his own tenure of office had taken a strange hold upon him. And might he not train up the boy, whose enthusiastic admiration for himself would give him such a strong hold upon him, as his successor in his work ; not to hold his post, he would be too young for that, but to carry on his work from another centre. The town was increasing yearly in size. The church, for which he was fighting so desperately at that moment, was but one of more which would be urgently needed as years rolled on, and at one of them he might leave his young cousin to build upon the foundation he hoped would be firmly and enduringly laid by that time.

Arthur Seton came and spent the Easter holidays with his cousin, to his own unbounded delight, and to Harold's great satisfaction. He was but a boy, but a fine, frank, manly fellow, with at least the dawnings of some better reason for wishing to enter the Church than mere admiration for his cousin. Still that admiration was so deep and enthusiastic that Harold soon saw his difficulty would probably be, not to train him as he would, but to prevent his devotion leading him into a slavish imitation of himself in everything.

Agnes Battersby made a deep impression upon Arthur.

Harold took him to see her one day, and the boy soon repeated the visit on his own account. Agnes had established a visiting list entirely independently of her mother, including not a few of the objectionable townspeople, who were ready enough to come forward and do all that lay in their power to enliven the many tedious hours which, under any circumstances, she had to spend.

She never went to the drawing-room till the evening. Its atmosphere was even less to her taste than it had been in days of old. A small morning-room had been fitted up entirely for her, and there she passed her time. Lady Battersby had secretly expressed her entire approval of this arrangement to her elder daughter. Of course, she said, it would be quite impossible now to refuse the poor darling anything; still she really hardly knew what she should have done if she had taken it into her head to have all those horrid people she chose to have to visit her, into the drawing-room. Some dreadful entanglement must have been the result.

Arthur admitted, half shyly, one evening, when Harold, who had been out all day himself, questioned him as to what he had been doing, that he had spent very nearly the whole afternoon at Shrublands, talking to Agnes.

"You young scamp," Harold said, "what business have you to go there without my leave?"

"She says she likes me to come and see her; and can't she talk too, about anything! Oh, Harold," and his bright face grew very serious, "she told me to-day all about her getting smashed that way. It's awful to think of. I declare I could have howled like a baby while she was telling me. Why, she isn't much more than a year older than I am, and never to move from that couch again! I can't bear to think of it. How awfully pretty and jolly she must have been too!"

"Yes, she would have just suited you, sir. But she's happier now than ever she was."

"So she says, but I can't understand it."

It was beyond the bright high-spirited boy, so full of animal life and spirits. He only stole off to Shrublands, day after day, to sit and watch her, and talk to her, and wonder, as he did so, how she could bear so dreadful a fate as she did; laying in beside her couch the seed of many a valuable future lesson.

"I say, Harold," he said one day when he came in, "I wish, if your reverence could find the time, you'd go to Shrublands this afternoon. I don't think all's quite right there."

"What's the matter?"

"Miss Battersby isn't quite herself. She tried to be as cheerful and merry as usual, but it was no go. Either she is not so well to-day, or something is worrying her."

He could imagine the cause better than Arthur. He knew she must have dark days occasionally.

"I was just going to send and ask you to come and see me this afternoon," she said, as he entered. "What made you come?"

"Arthur sent me."

"Sent you? What for?"

"He said you were not like yourself. What is the matter, Agnes? You don't look well to-day."

"Oh, it is nothing. I had rather a bad night."

"That is not all. You would not have thought of sending for me because you had not slept well."

"No, indeed," she answered, with a smile. "I have no intention of taxing you to that extent. I wanted to speak to you about Eva."

"Miss Macdonald. What of her?"

"I want you very much to go and see her. Have you time to go this afternoon?"

"More time than inclination. I am not fond of intruding myself uninvited upon Miss Macdonald."

"Mr. Seton, I believe you are positively afraid of her."

"I rather believe I am."

"It is very strange. Indeed, you don't know her, or you would feel quite differently."

"But why do you want me to go and see her?"

"Because of what she said to me this morning. She was here some time. She is very unhappy about something, what, I cannot make out, but she admitted to-day she wanted very much to ask you to do something for her, but had not the courage. She is very reserved, that is partly what makes her so cold and distant. I told her plainly I should tell you what she said, and beg you to ask her what she wanted you to do. I know she is at home this afternoon, and Major and Mrs. Thornton are away for the day, so you would be sure to find her alone. Will you go, Mr. Seton?"

He would have refused any one else, but who could refuse Agnes any request which it was possible to grant? especially one about which she was evidently so anxious. So with some misgivings he made the promise.

"Oh, thank you. I cannot tell you how much this has worried me. I cannot bear to see Eva so unhappy."

"You seem to take it for granted I can help her."

"Can you wonder at that?"

"Well, I will do your bidding. But mind, I shall say you sent me."

"Oh yes, say that. Throw all the responsibility on me. Dear Eva, I cannot bear to see such a sad look in her eyes, after all she has been to me. And not being very well, made me feel it more than usual this morning."

"That is not all, Agnes."

She half smiled. "You read too deep. Clouds will rise sometimes; but it is only because I am not well to-day."

"What are the clouds now?" he quietly asked.

She knew she must tell him. "Some doubts and perplexities," she said.

"About what?"

"About what I am doing—trying to lead a holier and better life than I have done in time past, and thereby offering to God the dregs of a life I never sought to offer to Him while He was showering upon it every blessing which could make it bright."

He almost started. The words struck him like the sudden and unexpected awakening of some well-known strain.

"You look at it in the wrong light," he replied. "He has dashed away all that brightened your life, on purpose to lead you to Himself."

"Yes ; but that is not the whole."

"What more ?"

"When I think of it all, the dread will rise sometimes whether the change is real and true. Has that holier life really a hold upon me? Supposing I could have health and strength suddenly restored, should I not turn from it as I did before? Is it not too much like a death-bed repentance ?"

"Be not faithless, but believing," he replied, with a smile.

"I don't understand ;" and she fixed her eyes upon him with the earnestness, almost intensity of expression, which always came into them when she could not quite follow his meaning.

"Granting the fact—what then ?"

"Then I am a hypocrite."

"No, my child, you are altogether wrong. You are entangling yourself in a difficulty which has sorely tried many besides you. As of old He called His chosen apostles, so your Master was calling you to follow Him, and you heard His voice, but the ties which held you back from obeying the call were too strong for you. He saw that, and with His own hand He has freed you from them, just because He saw they were too strong for you. Be content to follow Him in the path He has chosen for you, without tormenting yourself with useless fears as to whether you could do so in

some path which He has not called upon you to tread. Remember His own admission, that the flesh is sometimes too weak to follow where the spirit would lead ; and rest undoubtingly on the love which has already, for you, deprived the flesh of all power to hold you back from His service. Do you understand ?”

“ Yes ; I understand. But——”

“ But what ?”

“ It seems almost presumptuous to look at it in that light.”

“ Go to the utmost lengths in the direction of presumption you can possibly reach. There is no danger of it to those who fear it. You will never pass the limits of full and fearless confidence.”

She looked up with a smile. “ You are a skilled physician,” she said ; “ where did you learn so much ?”

“ In a very severe school, and under the training of such a master as it falls to the lot of few men to encounter. You owe much, child, to one whose name, even, you never heard. Now good-bye ! I am going to do your bidding, with the humiliating confession that should I find any unforeseen accident has caused Miss Macdonald to go out, I shall feel very much like a criminal suddenly reprieved.”



CHAPTER XIX.

EVELYN MACDONALD IS PROOF AGAINST THE RECTOR'S POWERS.

“WHAT could Evelyn Macdonald possibly want him to do for her? What, in fact, was there that he could do?” Harold Seton pondered over it in vain.

“Is Miss Macdonald at home?”

“Yes, sir.”

He could hardly restrain a smile at the sort of feeling that began to come over him.

Evelyn came into the drawing-room in a few minutes, with a brighter colour and a rather less composed manner than was usual with her. She spared Harold, however, by taking the initiative herself.

“It is very kind of you to come here, Mr. Seton. Agnes asked you to do so, I suppose, did she not?”

“Yes, she did. She told me you wanted to speak to me. If I can be of any service to you, Miss Macdonald, I shall be only too pleased.”

The first plunge over, he was himself again.

“I think, perhaps, you can. You have so much influence with Aunt Louisa. She would be sure to listen to anything coming from you.”

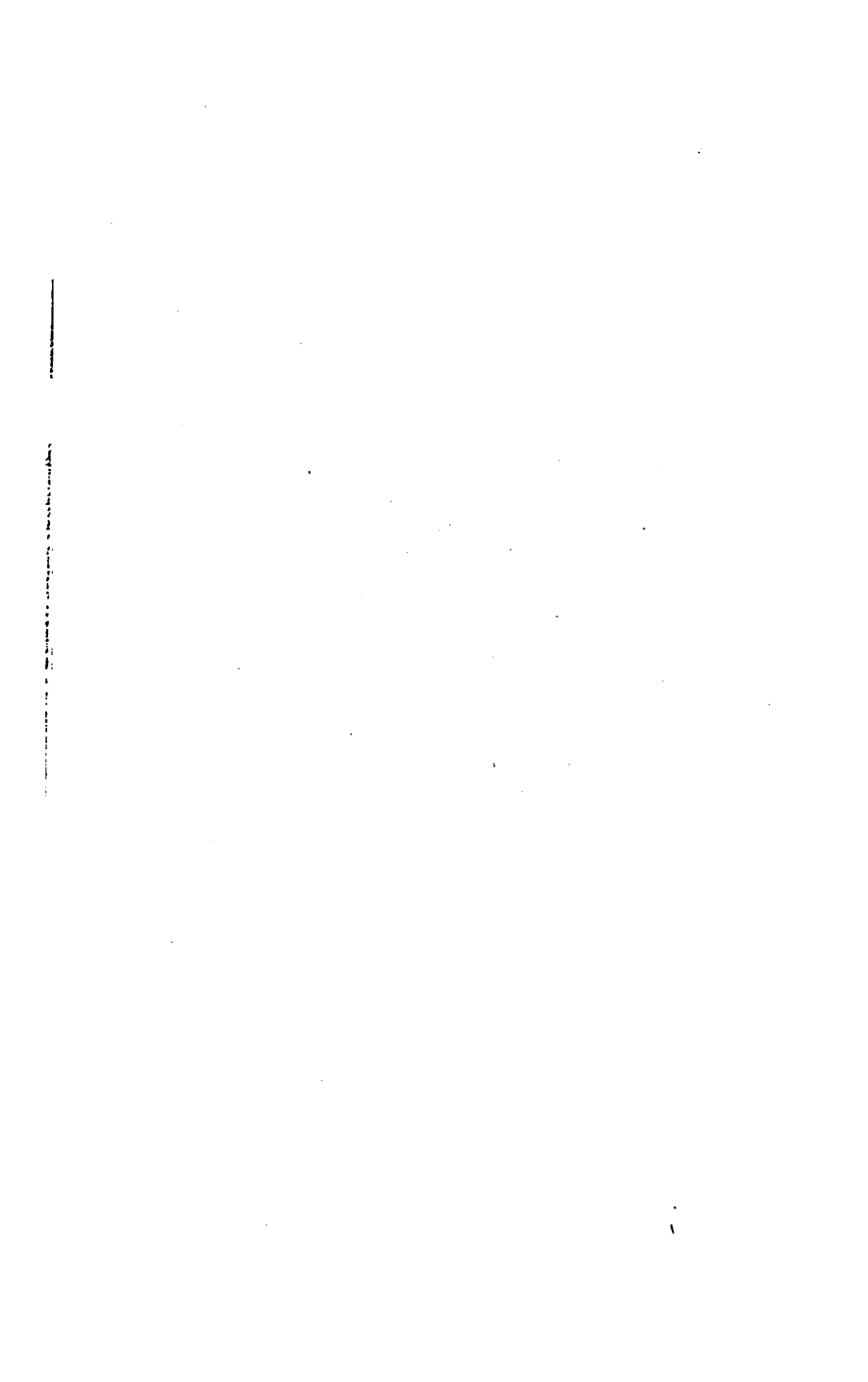
“I believe I have some weight with her. But in what way can that be of service to you?”

“I want you to persuade her to consent to let me go away from here.”

He expressed no surprise. He only quietly asked,—



See page 188.



“What reason am I to urge for such a wish on your part?”

“The reason that I cannot bear my life here.”

She spoke calmly, but it was a calmness evidently not maintained without difficulty. Harold Seton felt he was on the verge of some discoveries.

“Miss Macdonald,” he said, “you must be more explicit. If you wish that I should interfere in your affairs, you must make me understand both what you wish and why you wish it.”

She was silent for a moment, and she turned very pale. Then she asked, in a low distinct tone,—

“Mr. Seton, when you call me Miss Macdonald, do you know that you address me by a name I have no earthly right to bear?”

She waited quietly for his answer. There was nothing for it but to speak the truth.

“I do,” he said; “and had I had the least idea that you were aware of the fact yourself I should have felt deeply for you, far more than you can imagine.”

“Feel for me!” she exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of the long pent-up bitterness. “You might well do that; but you don’t know what it is, or what a position mine is. To feel yourself an impostor, almost to wince every time you are addressed by name. How would you like to stand in such a position, Mr. Seton?”

“I cannot imagine a much more painful one.”

“Be thankful you have only to imagine it,” she bitterly answered.

He was silent.

“You don’t know,” she went on, “what a life mine has been for the last four years. I was very happy till then. I led a strange life, and a bad life for a girl, for I was always about with men; I hardly ever saw a woman, except poor people, or servants; but poor papa was very kind to me,

and took good care of me, and I did love him dearly. It is just four years ago I heard all the truth. Oh, Mr. Seton, it was so dreadful. I could hardly bear it. I had often wondered why papa did not seem to like to speak of mamma, and thought it was because he had loved her so much. Oh, how could he have done it? I wish, I wish I had never known it."

"So do I, for your sake."

"It is that knowledge makes my life unbearable. They fancy here I don't know it. Aunt Louisa has tried more than once to find out, but I never let her suspect I did. But I cannot bear it, Mr. Seton. I am very proud, I know, and I know what they feel. I am not only a useless encumbrance,—Aunt Louisa wouldn't mind that, I believe; but I'm a disgrace to them—a blot on the family shield—a living memorial of my mother's disgrace—something they can't get rid of, and yet are ashamed to own. I cannot bear it, Mr. Seton, it will drive me mad."

Her voice failed her, and burying her face in her hands, she sobbed bitterly.

He did not speak. It was a very hard case in which to know how to speak to any purpose, and platitudes were not at all in his line.

She made desperate efforts to regain self-command, but it was some time before she succeeded. Then she spoke in a broken, hurried tone.

"Aunt Louisa is very kind, and doesn't think she shows what she feels, but I can see it in a thousand trifles. I am her sister's child, and she cannot cast me off; but I am a living disgrace to her and all her family. That is why I have acted as I have done ever since I came. I will not have any acquaintance with any one. Who, among all Aunt Louisa's friends, would even speak to me if they knew I was the natural daughter of a dissipated cavalry officer? and if it wasn't for Aunt Louisa's sake they should know it

too. I would at least be an impostor no longer. I would never have gone near poor Agnes if she had not so sorely needed some one to help her; and God knows that has been the only thing which has been bright in my life since I came here."

Her words were spoke with bitter emphasis, but Harold Seton knew the feelings from which they sprang were far more bitter. Right well could he understand what her position was to her proud sensitive nature and deep passionate feelings. But what could he say, or how hope to make it more tolerable to her? and merely to tell her she must simply endure to the end was but a poor consolation to offer.

"You have no need to describe to me, Miss Macdonald, what you feel. I can understand only too well how painful your position is. But still I hardly understand to what step you want me to induce Mrs. Thornton to consent."

"I want to go and earn my own livelihood. That's another pleasant feature in the case. I am not only a disgrace, but a burden. It was cruel of poor papa not to provide for me. He might have done it, but he never did. I am past sixteen now. If Aunt Louisa would only let me go to Paris for a year, or eighteen months, I could get a good situation afterwards as a governess. I should be much happier, and they would be free from me. I would change my name only too gladly, and I shouldn't feel I was an impostor then. No one would care about her governess's birth. Aunt Louisa meant kindly when she brought me here, but it was the cruellest thing she ever did. Will you try and persuade her to consent to this, Mr. Seton?"

"I cannot quite promise, on the instant, to do that, Miss Macdonald. But I will promise, willingly, that no effort shall be wanting on my part to bring about a happier state of things for you."

“You cannot do it by any other means than persuading her to let me go. I cannot bear my life here.”

“How would you bear the life of a governess?”

“I could bear anything better than to feel myself an impostor.”

He knew the step she meditated would be more utterly opposed to all Mrs. Thornton's wishes than any she could have suggested, and he quietly tried to turn her from it; but he did not find his influence all-powerful with Evelyn Macdonald. The ice once broken, she talked more unreservedly to him than he had ever heard her do to any one before, and he very soon began to discover that he had to deal with a character far too strong and self-reliant to be easily influenced by any one. Though she listened thoughtfully to all he said, she very clearly showed him, evidently quite unconsciously to herself, that she had not the least intention of consulting him upon the subject. She had only wished to make use of his influence with Mrs. Thornton to bring about the accomplishment of a project on which she was bent.

He tried by every means in his power to turn her from her purpose, but in vain; and something, almost approaching a feeling of pique, began to steal over him at finding himself foiled by a girl of her age. At last he suggested a compromise.

“I don't see any use in speaking at present of your ultimate views and wishes, Miss Macdonald. It is so impossible to foresee what modifying effect time and circumstances may have upon them. Will you be satisfied if I endeavour to persuade Mrs. Thornton to let you go to Paris for a year or two, leaving all your future arrangements to be settled at the end of that time? The thought of your doing what you suggest would distress her very much, I know. Why not spare her the annoyance until you are convinced that it is inevitable?”

She was amenable to sound reasoning if not to his influence. "Yes, I will be quite satisfied with that," she said; "I think you are right there."

"Then that much I will promise to try and do for you. I don't know whether Mrs. Thornton's respect for my judgment may extend to my opinions on female education, but I will try and induce her to consent to your going abroad for two years, merely as an advantage to yourself."

"Oh, thank you, thank you a thousand times! I know Auna Louisa will yield at once, if you only urge it. You do not know the—the—" She hesitated, and came to a stand.

"The what?"

Evelyn coloured a little. "The fact is, Mr. Seton, I could not find any word save the true one, and that one seemed hardly civil."

"Let us have the truth, by all means."

"Well, I was going to say, the ridiculously high opinion she has of you and your opinion on all subjects. And it really is ridiculous; for she would accept your judgment, supposing you would give it, just as undoubtingly upon a point about which you could not possibly know anything, as upon one on which you were most highly fitted to pronounce. I really believe, if she did not stand a little in awe of you, she would consult you about her servants' wages, and the most desirable pattern for marking her pocket-handkerchiefs."

"I fear I should feel disposed to decline the responsibility of offering advice on such points. But is it in order to provide a useful antidote to any vanity which a consciousness of my influence with Mrs. Thornton may excite, that you show yourself so determined to be entirely uninfluenced by anything I can say?"

"No, Mr. Seton, I had no thought of that. But you cannot understand my position, and therefore you cannot judge for me."

"I am not sure of that. However, dear Miss Macdonald, one thing I would urge. Whatever may be your ultimate decision about your future life, examine well, and assure yourself that it is the one to which you are called of God. Let no mere shrinking of human nature from what is painful, blind your judgment on that point. Only in that path can you find peace. Any other, how bright soever it may seem at first, will only grow more and more dark and painful the further you pursue it."

"I will promise that, willingly. I cannot think, now, but that I am doing right in endeavouring to fit myself for a life of honest independence. Please do not think me wilful or obstinate, because I do not yield to your opinion. I am not convinced, therefore I cannot give way. But rest assured I shall not forget your warning; and should I ever feel afraid that my inclinations are blinding me as to what is right, yours will be the advice I shall seek. Then you have only to show me what is right, and nothing, however painful, shall turn me back from it."

She looked up at him with a world of honest, steadfast purpose in her clear dark eyes as she spoke, and held out her hand, as though to intimate the conference was ended. She always took the lead under such circumstances involuntarily, an effect of her early training. Childhood had died very young in the scenes amidst which she had lived, and they were no scenes for the diffidence of girlhood; the instinct of womanhood had taught her that, and had guided her conduct as well. The manner had become habitual, and was the principal reason of her seeming so much older than she really was. Many a woman of twice her years might have envied the quiet, unaffected dignity, so valuable to her of old, and carrying a charm with it even now that it was no longer required as a safeguard.

"You must give me some further instructions before we part," Harold said. "Am I to suggest this project to Mrs.

Thornton, or am I only to try and induce her to consent to it after you have suggested it?"

"The latter, please. I will tell Aunt Louisa what I wish. She will oppose it, of course, she always sees objections to everything; and she is sure to consult you. Then please say all you can in favour of it. And once again, thank you most sincerely for bestowing your time and attention (I know how valuable both are) on me and my affairs. I wish I had spoken to you before."

"Why did you not?"

"I believe I am rather afraid of you."

He was very sure that he was of her, though they probably both used the term incorrectly. It is not always easy to define the exact line where respect ends and fear begins; and people are apt enough to confound the two feelings.

Mrs. Thornton, as Evelyn had predicted, saw no end to the difficulties of making the arrangement her niece wanted, though all the time the scheme was far from being unpleasant to her. Of course, her first idea was to consult the rector.

"Then you really think it desirable, Mr. Seton?"

"Indeed I do."

"But I don't see how it is to be managed. I cannot think why Eva is so determined on going abroad. Surely a first-rate finishing school in England would have done just as well."

Harold could not quite enlighten her as to Evelyn's ulterior object in having the credit of a foreign education.

"I think you had better let her have her own way in this respect. I do not see any difficulty."

Mrs. Thornton saw a thousand. It was such a dangerous thing to send a girl abroad, unless you knew very well where you were sending her; and it was so long since she had been in Paris herself, she really knew nothing about it now. She had, moreover, a vague and shadowy dread

of Jesuits, and of hopeful subjects for conversion being silently seized in the dead of night and conveyed away to lonely convents, probably to reappear, after the lapse of years, hopelessly insane. Harold succeeded, however, in soothing her fears, and persuading her that his own intimate acquaintance with the Paris of the present day, would quite make up for her ignorance of it ; so, at last, to him was confided the task of making all necessary arrangements.

The prospect of going seemed to bring fresh life to Evelyn. "I can never thank you enough, Mr. Seton," she said, when she wished him good-bye. "I should never have carried the point but for you."

"I am not sure of that," he answered. "I may have simplified the matter, but I must confess I incline to the belief that you would not, in any case, stand in such urgent need of assistance from any one. Remember the promise you made me."

"I shall never forget that, and if I cannot decide for myself, I will rest on your decision."

"Really," Mrs. Thornton said, as she returned to the drawing room after the carriage had driven off, "I shall quite miss her. What a strange girl she is. If she had always been so bright and animated as she has been since it was settled she should go to Paris, I really do not think I should have been able to make up my mind to part with her. Ah, if poor dear Amy had only been like her daughter in some respects ——."

She finished the sentence with a sigh ; but Harold Seton began, from that moment, to doubt whether Evelyn Macdonald would ever carry out her purpose after all.

CHAPTER XX.

SIX YEARS LATER.

Six years later, and something more. More than seven years since he had first seen Middleborough, and Harold Seton was reading a letter from Arthur, telling him he was to be ordained in a few weeks, and begging him to make a point of being present. He laid down the letter, and allowed himself to drift into a fit of musing. Could it be possible he had really been rector of Middleborough more than seven years, and was five-and-thirty? If so, his tenure of office there would probably be a longer one than he had predicted to himself and to Agnes Battersby. He felt the work of that seven years had told upon him severely; still, he had either over-estimated the strain, or under-estimated his own powers of endurance. He was worn, but not worn out, nor anything like it, and at that point in his reflections he heaved a deep sigh. Then he set himself to do what of late he had begun to venture to do occasionally, to look calmly, both backwards and forwards. He was not so much afraid of doing either as he had been in days of yore. Full ten years had passed of the life which had, at its commencement, looked so gloomy, and after all it had not seemed so very dark, or else his eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness that it had failed to exercise its depressing influence on him. Heart and head during all that time had worked well together; and if they had contrived to agree during the ten years between five-and-twenty and five-and-thirty, he might surely look forward with good confidence

for the future. Altogether, as far as he personally was concerned, the rector's fit of musing that evening was very satisfactory. As regarded his parish, it was not quite so much so. He had carried his point at last, and secured the church for which he had fought so hard ; but it had been the work of some years, during which the town had been steadily increasing in size ; so, by the time it was built, and its district taken off his hands, he found his parish still nearly as much beyond his management, as it had been when he first undertook the care of it.

Perhaps men never do judge correctly of what they have themselves done. As Harold Seton sat musing over the state of his parish, and contrasting what it was with what it had been on the one hand, and with what it ought to be on the other, he probably contemplated the securing of that district church as the most satisfactory piece of work he had been able to accomplish, and as the most advantageous one for Middleborough ; in which opinion he was entirely wrong. The greatest benefit he had conferred upon the town had been conferred all unwittingly, and had cost him, perhaps, the sharpest, if not the worst pang he had ever known, in that indescribable feeling which had made him shiver from head to foot, as he saw Agnes Battersby's slight form hurled with such fearful violence against the heavy turnpike gate. She had been a general favourite before, but on her couch she was queen of Middleborough, and she had not been slow to find it out, and to estimate aright the untold power of weakness and helplessness. Harold Seton himself did not know how much he owed to her, though he had wondered more than once at effects for which he could see no adequate cause. The influence she had by degrees acquired was enormous. All her old straightforward truthfulness and steadfastness of purpose were strong as ever ; and now there was a motive power to direct them which had been wanting in her days of health and active life. Harold had himself,

quite unintentionally, suggested the idea to her, which she had so rapidly worked out into a regular purpose.

"Mr. Seton," she said to him, one day, "I must have something to do. I cannot bear to remain idle."

"But you are never idle."

"Never absolutely lying with my hands crossed, yawning, I daresay," she replied, laughing, "but I am busy doing nothing."

"How can any further occupation be found for you than you have already, my child?" he said, rather sadly.

"Cannot you give me something to occupy my thoughts?" she asked. "I can't be reading all day, and the best part of the night too. And then—oh, Mr. Seton," she broke in, almost bitterly, "how can people sentimentalize about innocence, when they must know what their own hearts can produce sometimes?"

"How would you like to have been a nun, Agnes?"

"A nun! oh, Mr. Seton! what an awful life it must be. But why do you ask?"

"I hardly know. It was almost an involuntary question, suggested by your words. If you feel the evils of idleness, what must they be, with physical health and strength to help them on? But if you want an occupation for your thoughts, I will give you one. Suggest to me a method for managing my old adversary, the mayor."

"Is he your adversary?"

"Not personally. He is a most estimable old piece of obstinacy; but officially I can make nothing of him; and most assuredly, if the corporation do not before long take some steps towards improving the sanitary condition of the low parts of the town, we shall have some terrible results follow from their neglect."

"In what way? Is it really so bad?"

"It is simply awful. The drainage is utterly inefficient, and the state of the houses, especially when the tides are

high, beggars all description. Then the over-crowding is frightful, as well. These are evils I cannot reach, and I cannot induce the corporation to move actively, chiefly because the mayor is so supine in his official capacity. I believe he has never quite got over the idea that I am a Jesuit, and therefore regards even sanitary reforms, when suggested by me, as something suspicious. If you will suggest to me some method of bringing him to reason, I shall be for ever indebted to you."

He spoke in jest, but she did not take his words in that light. Agnes Battersby had always been famed for "going straight at a thing," and the very next morning the mayor received a note to say she would be glad to see him. Of course he went. Who could refuse her commands? And then and there she pleaded the case with him, so earnestly and pathetically, that he promised to bring the subject officially before the corporation at once. That was her first taste of the power of weakness. She knew that her "broken back," as people were in the habit of calling it, had quite as much to do with the mayor's docility as her reasoning, if not more, and she drew many conclusions from that fact. Many a time afterwards did she adroitly draw from Harold Seton descriptions of his difficulties, and then bend all the force of her silent influence to their removal; and very much had Middleborough, as well as the rector, gained from the unseen worker, who so warmly seconded all his efforts.

The end of these six years saw Evelyn Macdonald still at Middleborough. She had stayed at school in Paris for three years, only coming back to her aunt for a few weeks in the summer; but every time she came Mrs. Thornton grew more enthusiastic about the enormous advantage going abroad had been to her, and Harold Seton wondered how it would all end.

At last, when she was nineteen, she left Paris for good. Those three years had greatly changed her in outward appear-

ance. She had gained something in height, though more in appearance than in reality, through the change from the girl to the woman. Her old dignity was unimpaired, but a little softened by a peculiarly winning grace of manner. She was very handsome, with a clear, dark complexion, well-cut features, perhaps a shade too marked for the perfection of female beauty, and splendid eyes. But neither features nor colouring had much to do with the especial charm of her face. Its depth and constant variety of expression would have given beauty to any face. Like a landscape in a varying light it was always the same, and yet for ever changing. Seeing her only once in the year, Mrs. Thornton had been more conscious of the change in her than she would probably have been had Evelyn remained always with her, and, woman-like, having passed the age for personal vanity, she was not a little proud of her handsome niece ; little dreaming that, until the very day she returned to Middleborough, as Mrs. Thornton fancied for good, that niece was firmly holding to her intention of very soon removing herself entirely from her aunt's care.

Evelyn had not, however, forgotten her promise to Harold Seton, and very soon after her final return from Paris, doubts began to cross her mind as to the possibility of reconciling it with her inclinations. Quite unconsciously, Mrs. Thornton was almost daily showing her that a gulf was opening, and rapidly widening, between the life she wished, and the life she ought to lead. She was constantly letting fall casual remarks, which plainly showed how much she was building upon having Evelyn always with her. And at last they came to an explanation on the subject, more, perhaps, from a sort of despairing effort on Evelyn's part, to hold the purpose she felt was so rapidly slipping from her grasp, than from any other cause.

Mrs. Thornton's health had failed considerably during the last year or two, and one morning, after she had been

confined to her room for a week, during which time she had insisted on Evelyn's attending to all her household duties for her, she suddenly proposed that she should take them for her entirely.

"You see, my dear," she said, "I'm not near so strong as I was, and really I do find all this sort of work very trying. You are a capital housekeeper, I don't see why you should not take it for me altogether."

Evelyn's colour rose. "I hardly think it would be well I should do so, Aunt Louisa," she said.

"Why not, my dear?"

Evelyn hesitated, but she felt it was a case of now or never.

"Well, supposing I should not be here very long," she answered, at last; "you would find it so hard to resume them then."

"Not be here long!" Mrs. Thornton repeated, with vague ideas of fascinating Frenchmen beginning to float through her mind. "My dear Eva, what do you mean?"

"Aunt Louisa, I don't want to stay here. No, don't interrupt me," she said, as Mrs. Thornton uttered an exclamation of surprise, "hear me out. You and Uncle Thornton have been more than kind to me, but I cannot help looking forward. What is to become of me hereafter? You know I have no fortune."

"No, indeed, I know that, my dear, and the thought has often distressed me. But you see—your poor mamma—if she had had marriage settlements it would have been different."

"Aunt Louisa, you need not fence in that way. I know perfectly well why I have no fortune. I have known ever since I was twelve years old that mamma never was married, and that my father's wife is living now."

Mrs. Thornton was speechless with astonishment; a fact which afforded Evelyn no small satisfaction.

"I never chose that you should know I knew that," she went on. "No one does know except one. It has been a bitter drop in my cup, a useful antidote to the pride which has come to me with my father's blood. But the knowledge of that, and that I have no fortune, has always made me long to do something for my own maintenance, and that is what made me say I might not be here long."

"My dear Eva, it is not to be thought of."

"Yes, it is, Aunt Louisa. I know you would consider it unfitting for your sister's child to earn her own livelihood, and so it might be under ordinary circumstances; but it is not unfitting for me, remember, and it is what I shall have to do sooner or later."

"Oh no, my dear, I hope not. You may marry, you know."

An indescribable look crossed Evelyn's face.

"So very likely," she said, in a low tone. "The circumstances of my birth would be such an inducement, would they not?"

Mrs. Thornton, with all her prejudices respecting caste, had been far too often troubled by that idea herself to have any answer to make to this blunt statement of the case. Perhaps it was as well for her it was so, as it induced her to base her resistance of Evelyn's wishes on arguments far more likely to have weight with her. There was plenty of time hereafter, she said, to think of that. She had by no means given up the hope yet of inducing her brother to make over to Evelyn some portion, at least, of her mother's fortune; and last of all, she and Major Thornton could not spare her. They were growing old; it was very lonely all by themselves; and they loved her dearly. She must not forsake them.

Mrs. Thornton was too generous to add the claim they had upon her, but Evelyn added it herself, and she was conquered from that moment, though she did not instantly

yield the point. If her remaining with them was really of so much importance to her uncle and aunt, there was no occasion for her to consult the rector as to what was right. She knew well enough without his guidance.

She quietly told him one day, when they happened to meet, what had passed.

"I have never forgotten the promise I made you, Mr. Seton," she said. "You spoke so earnestly, your words made a very deep impression upon me, and I know now I must stay here. But it is very hard still."

"It will grow easier in time, Miss Macdonald. Had you persisted in your determination your life would still have had many crosses, and they would have been crosses of your own seeking. Those are the crosses that grow heavier with wearing. The crosses which are not of our own seeking grow lighter the longer they are carried."

"I know that, and in one thing it is lighter already. You cannot think how kind Aunt Louisa is, now she knows I know about poor mamma. She seems always on the watch to show me that the stain on my birth makes no difference to her affection for me. But, after all, we are not a bit suited to each other, and it is very hard to feel oneself an impostor, Mr. Seton."

"You are not that. Yours is simply a case of concealment, not of assumption. Your position is, I admit, a painful one; but believe me, Miss Macdonald, there are worse fates in this world than yours; positions even more painful, and which have to be borne silently and secretly. Only endure unto the end. You have bravely resolved to do what you feel to be right, regardless of your own wishes and feelings; the sacrifice will neither be unrecorded nor unrewarded."

So Evelyn Macdonald stayed quietly at Middleborough, no one, not even Harold Seton himself, suspecting how painful her position was to her, or how dear her sacrifice

had cost her. She was too reserved ever to say much about herself ; but taking it all in all her life was nearly as lonely a one as the rector's own ; and often she sighed for that voluntary resigned independence which, whatever its crosses might have been, would at least have rendered so much less painful to her, that visiting of the sins of the fathers upon the children, which now she felt so keenly.



CHAPTER XXI.

AGNES BATTERSBY IS LESS STRAIGHTFORWARD THAN USUAL

ARTHUR SETON came. He was no stranger in Middleborough. From the time of his first visit to his cousin he had been a constant visitor at the rectory, and he knew almost as much about the parish as Harold did himself. He was, in his way, both morally and physically, as fine a specimen of muscular Christianity as the rector. A big, broad-shouldered fellow, with a handsome manly face, full of life and spirits, and with a frank, genial manner which was irresistible. If he had a weakness, it was his deep and ardent admiration for his cousin, who, if not actually infallible in his eyes, was not very far from it. He had always revered him quite enough, but some remarks the bishop had made to him at the time of his ordination had not a little increased the feeling.

He came to the rectory when he first arrived in his new capacity as curate—only as a visitor, however; but it seemed likely to be a long visit. Harold had some objection to make, every time Arthur proposed settling himself anywhere.

“But really, Harold,” he remonstrated at last, “it is time I was settled somewhere.”

“You are in a desperate hurry.”

“Desperate hurry, indeed!” Arthur exclaimed with a laugh, “I like that. Why, I have been here over two months, and I have never yet been able even to induce your reverence to say in what part of the parish you would like me to find an habitation for myself.”

"Somewhere near here, certainly. The other three fellows are pretty well scattered over the parish. I always keep the junior under my own eye."

"Then I had better look out for rooms somewhere near the church."

"All in good time; you need not be in a hurry. I believe you want to escape from being under my personal surveillance."

"Of course I do. You have no idea what a damaging effect upon my prospects in life is produced by my being perpetually under the rectorial shadow. I should get no end of slippers and smoking caps, if it wasn't for the fear of your getting scent of them, to say nothing of locks of hair and original poetry. I say, Harold," he added, more gravely, "it strikes me, judging from what I have seen already, that if the fair damsels of Middleborough are specimens of the class in general, it is precious lucky for them that we young parsons are obliged, for our own sakes, to mind what we are about."

"Take care, for your own sake, lad, that you do mind what you are about. Other men can please themselves; but a clergyman's reputation is nearly as brittle as a woman's."

"I know it is. But upon my word, Harold,"—and Arthur's face grew very grave—"it's awfully hard upon young fellows like us, to be pitched straight into the middle of all this kind of thing, and then be expected not only to take care of ourselves, but of these demonstrative young women as well. But look here, we have entirely wandered from the subject under discussion. Where am I to settle myself?"

"Where you are." Harold answered, shortly.

"Where I am?"

"Yes; I have been gradually arriving at the conclusion for some time, that the best thing for you to do, is to stay here altogether. You don't object, do you, Arthur?"

"Object? I should rather think not."

"Then stay. The fact is, lad, I don't think I could get on without you. I never intended to propose such an arrangement. I've settled down into a regular old bachelor during the seven years I have lived alone here, and I didn't think it would suit me to have any one in the house; but I have changed my mind of late. It does me good to have such a fresh, bright specimen of animal life as you about the house. It is a sort of mental tonic."

He spoke with a smile, but there was a ring of bitterness in his words. Arthur looked at him rather anxiously.

"Harold, I'm certain you overwork yourself tremendously."

"Nonsense!"

"It's no nonsense. I know well enough what men are; and a man ought no more to feel like that at five-and-thirty, than he ought to look as you do. Who would dream that you are only twelve years older than I am? If you go on at that rate you'll be pretty well worn out in another ten years."

"My work here will be done before then."

"That it won't; there'll be work here that no one will be able to do so well as you, for the next twenty years."

"No. After a man has worked hard at the same thing for a long time he gets into a sort of routine, and his work becomes mechanical. Then it is quite time a fresh hand should take it up, and infuse vigour and energy into it. I'll train you to do my work, Arthur, and then leave it in your hands."

He had effectually turned Arthur's thoughts from himself personally—a subject which it never pleased him to hear discussed,—and he kept him occupied for a long time in an animated discussion on work and workers.

It was a settled thing, from that evening, that the rectory was to be Arthur's home. Harold really loved him too well

to care to let him go, and he liked the idea of having him always there, and training him according to his own ideas. Very little did he dream of some of the ideas which were beginning to develop themselves in the minds of others.

Agnes Battersby was Arthur Seton's prime confidante. Very soon after he came to Middleborough as his cousin's curate, he secured for her the enjoyment—an untold one to her—of going out occasionally.

"Why do you never go out, Agnes?" he asked, one bright summer afternoon, when he was sitting beside her.

"I only wish I could," she said, with a longing look out of the open window at the bright blue sky.

"Well, I am sure it might be managed."

She shook her head. "Don't talk of it, Arthur. I don't dare to think about it. I should grow discontented if I did."

"But I will talk about it, and, what is more, I'll bring it to pass. Why did you never say you would like it, before this?"

"I have sometimes said to mamma that, if it could be managed, I should like to go out for a drive occasionally; I thought it would help me to sleep better—and my long wakeful nights are very trying sometimes;—but she always saw so many difficulties, I gave it up; I really had not energy to fight the point. Besides, mamma suggested so many risks, I began to feel quite nervous about it."

Arthur bit his lip. He was somewhat impetuous, and his indignation was rising.

"Why did you never tell Harold you would like it? I'll be bound the difficulties would have vanished like smoke if you had."

"I know they would. But I would not have mentioned it to him for the world. I believe he thinks I don't care about it. He did speak of it once or twice, and I always tried to make him think I did not care. I never would let him think about me if I could possibly help it."

"Why not?"

"Because I know the pain it gives him. I don't believe any one knows what my accident cost him. I can understand better now I am older what he feels, poor fellow; though he knows the blessing it has been to me. I know he always blames himself, and I would never let his thoughts turn in that direction if I could help it. There would be a great deal to arrange before I could be taken out."

"And arranged it all shall be, before I'm a week older. There's no difficulty, Agnes. Her ladyship will just have to buy a pony-carriage, that is all, and I sure it is time she had a new one."

Agnes had no great faith in the success of Arthur's schemes. But, true to his word, within a week a new pony-carriage appeared, chosen with a special view to the necessity of Agnes being always in a recumbent position, and Arthur told her he meant to drive her out for the first time himself. That first drive was more of a trial than a pleasure to her. Though it was many a long day since any rebellious thoughts had troubled her, still the sight of old familiar scenes seemed to make the vanished past stand out in strong and bright relief against both the present and the future.

After the first day, however, her occasional drives told with marvellous effect both upon her health and spirits. But before very many months had passed she began to regard them rather as a means to an end.

Evelyn's trials were no secret to her. Somehow or other, in one of those communicative fits to which very reserved people are occasionally subject, she had told the whole story, and given Agnes a sketch, at the same time, of her early life, which had put a period for ever to her surprise that, as a girl, Evelyn had appeared so much beyond her age. The position would not have been to Agnes Battersby what it was to Evelyn Macdonald; her temperament was so different an one. Still, she had quite perception enough of

Evelyn's character to understand what it was to her, and to feel deeply for her. It was a subject not often mentioned. Evelyn did not in general like to talk about it, and Agnes knew that, but she had not thought the less about it, nor with less anxious speculations as to the girl's future prospects.

Arthur Seton was very often Agnes' charioteer: not for want of occupation—natural energy, and something of a spirit of emulation, made him as indefatigable, if not as yet quite as steady and systematic, a worker as his cousin,—but from an intuitive perception that to be driven by him or the rector was no inconsiderable addition to her enjoyment of her drives; and also—at least, so he bluntly asserted—because, in such a place as Middleborough, it was a blessing to be able to speak to a woman without being immediately reported to be engaged to her. In the course of some of these drives he had talked a great deal to Agnes about Harold, told her of many slight circumstances which, living in the same house, he had noticed, and boldly expressed his opinion that the sort of life he led could not be good for him.

"It's no use talking about it, Agnes," he said, one day, when a desultory conversation on various subjects had at last brought them round to the rector, "it can't be good for any man to live so entirely alone."

"But it is not the case now you are there."

"It's not quite so bad, but you've no idea how comparatively little I see of him, after all. He's almost always either out or hard at work in his own study. Sometimes, for days together, we never meet, except at dinner. And after all, I can't get at him."

"I don't understand."

"I mean there is something about him I can't get at. I know well enough if I was his son he could not be fonder of me; and yet I always feel as if he were keeping me at a

certain distance. There's something," he went on, in a graver tone, "almost like a woman's tenderness in the way he watches over me; though he's no narrow-minded fidget. Sometimes I can hardly help fancying there's a touch of the ascetic about him. I don't suppose there ever was a man who has led a more blameless life; and yet, to hear him speak as he does at times, when he takes it into his head to give me some pointed warnings, you would think he had been a thorough profligate. He shows the keenest interest in any trifle that concerns me, but as far as he is personally concerned, I always feel there is a barrier I cannot pass."

"He was always rather an enigma to me," Agnes thoughtfully answered. "You'll think it rather a schoolgirl sort of question, perhaps; but do you think he was ever crossed in love?"

"I don't much think it. But I do know that, though it would turn me out of an uncommonly comfortable home, I do wish, most tremendously, he would marry."

"He told me once he never should marry."

"Moonshine! Men always say that, and none mean it less than those who say it most. It's a most disinterested wish on my part, certainly, under all the circumstances; but I do wish it most heartily. Such a solitary life can't be good for any man,—and what a husband he would make!"

"Suppose we try to entangle him in a matrimonial snare. With a watchful enemy without and a traitor within, don't you think our chances would be very fair?"

"Of hoodwinking Harold and making him do anything he didn't choose to do? Yes, I should think our chances of success about as great as if we tried to poise the great pyramid on its apex. But who would you recommend?"

"What would you say to Evelyn Macdonald?"

"They had both spoken jestingly; Arthur genuinely so; but Agnes in a way which showed there was an under-

current of serious purpose of some sort not very far below the surface, and she was closely watching Arthur as she spoke.

He gave vent to a long, low whistle. "The magnificent Miss Macdonald!" he said. "I am not in a position to have any opinion, save one."

"What?"

"That if Harold could ever summon courage to propose to that splendid piece of stately femininity—to coin a word,—Horatius keeping the bridge is a joke to him, as a specimen of cool courage."

"Nonsense, Arthur. You would like and admire her immensely, if you only knew her better."

"Possibly; but that is just what I am never likely to do. I do admire her; I think she is awfully handsome; but I never came across a girl of whom I was so horribly afraid."

"But seriously, Arthur, I do think she would suit Mr. Seton admirably, if one could only persuade him to see it."

"And of course she would jump at the chance," Arthur said, with a mischievous smile.

"Of course she would do nothing of the kind. But I really think it would be worth trying; and I will tell you what I shall do as the first step. I shall contrive to make you see a good deal more of Evelyn, and then if you like her as much as I think you will when you know her better, I shall expect you to sound her praises—judiciously, you know—in Mr. Seton's ears. He won't suspect you of ulterior designs, as he might me."

Arthur laughed heartily. "Commend me to a woman for having an insatiable thirst for matchmaking," he said. "Very well, I'll inspect her more carefully, the next time I see her, than I have hitherto done, and endeavour to overcome my natural dread of her enough to speak to her."

He looked upon the whole thing as a mere jest, but as

one which might, at any rate, be something of amusement to Agnes.

A mischievously triumphant look crossed Agnes' face at his answer, though she subdued it instantly. But when she was placed again on her couch, and left alone, she indulged in a hearty fit of laughter.

Like all clever women she had a natural talent for intrigue, and most successfully had she exercised it that day. She did most earnestly wish to see Evelyn Macdonald happily married; but nothing was further from her thoughts or reflections than that she should marry Harold Seton. She knew well enough his assertion to her that he should never marry was no mere declamation, and that the decision was as irrevocable as it was firmly settled. Why it should be so, she had often wondered; that it was so, she had not the slightest doubt. From the time she had first heard all that made Evelyn's position so painful to her, she had longed to see her freed from it, and had looked upon her marrying as the only chance of such a consummation. Very soon, too, she had grown into a habit of connecting the subject with Arthur Seton, and before long she had fully admitted to herself a desire to bring about a marriage between him and Evelyn. This had been before he was ordained, and from the time he had been settled at the rectory, she had anxiously watched the circumstances of the case, with some chagrin at seeing how little disposed Arthur seemed for anything more than a distant acquaintance with Evelyn, yet not daring to attempt to throw them much together, lest suspicions fatal to her designs should be aroused in the mind of either.

Most skilfully had she availed herself of the unexpected turn affairs had taken. She had given Arthur an amply sufficient reason for watching Evelyn with interest, and won for herself an impunity, at least as far as he was concerned, in openly trying to throw them into each other's society,

and in sparing no pains to make him like her, without much danger of leading him to suspect her designs. To throw them into each other's society, and try and teach them rightly to estimate each other, was the extent of Agnes Battersby's matrimonial schemes. Beyond that the affair must take care of itself.

It had little chance of making much progress, for a time at least. Even Agnes was left very much to herself. It had been a very dry, hot summer, and with the first autumn rains came low fever; seizing of course with terrible force upon the low parts of the town, and every one turned to the rector to know what was to be done.

"I think a new hospital will be the next thing I shall have to struggle for," Harold said to Agnes one day, when he had found time to pay her a visit. "The hospital accommodation is utterly insufficient for a town of this size."

"Surely you would find no great difficulty in securing that. A purely philanthropical object doesn't generally rouse so many idiosyncracies into active existence as a strictly religious one."

"I daresay not, but somehow I don't feel the energy for difficulties I did some years ago. I begin to fear sometimes I am growing rather mechanical. Still I must think about it. It will be sorely needed some of these days, I believe."

"Has nothing been done to improve that part of the town?"

"Oh yes; but as always happens, where you have to deal with a corporate body, what is done is terribly in arrears of what ought to be done. We may be thankful, as we stand, things are not worse than they are. The harvest was abundant, so provisions are cheap. If ever we have such an unhealthy autumn as this, with scarcity, and consequent high prices, adding distress to the evil, we shall have such an outburst of typhus fever in that district as will scare the whole town, and render insufficient any amount of hospital accommodation we could provide."

"What is Arthur doing with himself? I have not seen him for some time."

"Working like a mill-horse. You will see him soon, I dare say. Things are beginning to improve already. He will make a splendid worker when he has had a little more experience, and got one other thing."

"What?"

"A good wife. The lad will want that, I think."

"Why don't you find him one?"

"Nay, he cannot afford to marry at present. Besides, matchmaking is quite out of my line."

More than one magnate of importance in Middleborough was summoned after that to hold council with Agnes Battersby; and very soon the idea that the town required a larger hospital than it possessed was freely ventilated, as the first step towards raising the funds necessary to build one. Agnes little dreamed how soon such funds would be abundantly forthcoming, or why it would be so.







See page 217.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

ARTHUR SETON paid Agnes the promised visit before very long, and fairly made her shudder at all he told her of what had happened during the last few weeks.

"Oh, Arthur," she exclaimed, "I never knew that part of the town was so bad, at least not now. I do remember the sudden vehemence with which Mr. Seton refused long ago, one very memorable day, to take me there. But I thought it was better now."

"Perhaps it may be, but it is bad enough, especially where all the Irish are herded. It is something frightful down there. We get lots of help though; I didn't think there were so many people here would come forward to help as did. But I say, Agnes, Miss Macdonald is a regular trump."

"Oh, you have come round to that opinion, have you?"

"Well, you know, I always had an enormous respect for her, and having seen a good deal of her during this time I've a little got over my dread of her. I should not like now, you know, rashly to intrude upon her; but I can speak to her without trembling all over, as I used to do."

"Arthur, how can you be so absurd?"

"I declare it's true. But I've never felt so much afraid of her since I went into one of the houses where the fever was bad, and found her sitting there, holding a poor child who was dying in her arms. There was a sort of Madonna look about her I have never forgotten, and it has often given me courage since."

"Then you can sound her praises to Mr. Seton."

"Oh, I've done that, but there's no occasion. He is quite alive to all her perfections, I can tell you. The rector is a pretty keen observer, though he doesn't say much. But look here, Agnes, I am coming to drive you out to-morrow."

"Then I shall make Eva go too. She could sit quite comfortably on the back seat."

"Do, by all means, and draw her out a little. I can't quite manage that yet, but she can say such awfully sententious things it is enough to kill one with laughter. Do you know I really do think sometimes, there is a chance your hopes may be fulfilled."

"Do you?" Agnes asked, turning away to conceal the involuntary smile called up by his words.

"I do indeed, if only Harold is not matrimony proof. Sometimes I almost begin to fancy he is. But we shall see."

Agnes thought it was time to enlighten him a little further. "Mr. Seton would have a better chance with Eva than any man in this world, I think."

"Why? Do you mean she is in love with him?"

"Not in the least. But if he asked her to be his wife she would know he did it with a full knowledge of all the circumstances of the case."

Arthur looked very much puzzled. It was very clear he knew nothing, and that was just what Agnes wanted to find out. She was under no promise of secrecy with respect to Evelyn's history, and she thought it as well Arthur should know it at once.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said.

She told him the whole story, not only graphically, but skilfully; dwelling on the very points most likely to arouse his interest in Evelyn.

"Poor girl," he said, when she had told her tale, "what a painful position for her."

"Painful! You have no idea how keenly she feels it. It

is just that makes me say Mr. Seton would have a better chance with her than any one else. He knows it all. Mrs. Thornton told him all about it before Eva came. I think if any one else proposed to her she would coldly refuse, even if it broke her heart to do it, thinking that if he knew the truth he would shrink from taking such a step."

"Why should he? It is no fault of hers."

"Exactly; but every one would not see it in that light, and Eva's sense of honour is very keen."

Arthur reflected in silence, and Agnes did not disturb his meditations. She was very well satisfied with the position of affairs. There was plenty of time before her. When he began to show symptoms of wincing at the suggestion that Evelyn and his cousin were well suited to each other, she knew she might rest upon her laurels.

She persuaded Evelyn to go with them for many a drive, and she succeeded in throwing them tolerably constantly into one another's society at other times as well. And then, seeing herself fairly on the way to accomplish her heart's desire, she began, like many other people, to be visited by misgivings and compunctions.

Was she acting well and wisely? Had she not looked at one side of the subject to the too entire exclusion of the other? Arthur Seton was but young. Was it well to entangle him in an engagement when he would certainly not be in a position, at present at least, to marry a girl without any fortune? Then what would his family say to such a marriage? And supposing they strongly objected on the score of Evelyn's birth, what would Evelyn herself do, and whichever way things turned how much pain and annoyance would it not occasion her?

Such thoughts as these began to trouble Agnes by day, and sometimes to stop her sleeping at night; and at last she determined to take the rector himself into her confidence, at least to the extent of giving him an idea of the possi-

bilities of the case, and to be in a measure guided by what he thought. If he approved, she should have no fear. His weight thrown in would turn the balance of any scale ; and she had no fear of his being unduly influenced by the prejudices of caste.

Agnes did not very often make her appearance in the drawing-room on any of the evenings when Lady Battersby received, or on the occasion of her periodical dinner parties. She had cordially hated both in her days of health, and now gladly availed herself of the excuse of being unable to stand the glare and heat. But there were exceptions to this rule. Sometimes, when only a few friends were expected, she would have her couch, as usual, wheeled into the drawing-room during dinner-time, and spend the evening there ; and round that couch all the mirth of the party was sure to be collected. One of these exceptional evenings was always Christmas Day. Any very elaborate festivities were quite out of keeping with the character of the day. It was the proper time for family gatherings ; old friends and cordial hospitality : so Lady Battersby acquiesced in the received canon, and always had a small and select party of intimate friends to dinner on Christmas evening.

That was a bright frosty Christmas Day, and Agnes had held a regular levee ; in fact, the little sitting-room had been so over-crowded, that some of her visitors had been of sheer necessity obliged to go to the drawing-room. By the time her maid came to dress her for the evening she was looking very thoughtful. Evelyn had, of course, been with her, and Arthur Seton had looked in for half an hour in the afternoon, and Agnes fancied she had detected some of those straws which best show, according to the old proverb, which way the wind blows. She was not quite certain. She thought facts might, perhaps, have taken a colouring from her feelings, but still it was certainly time she should say something to Harold, if she wished him to be prepared for

possible contingencies. Her resolution received a spur before her toilet was concluded.

"There's quite a large party to-night, miss," her maid said, as she was arranging her hair; "much larger than my lady generally has on Christmas Day."

"Is there? Who's there?"

"Why there's Major and Mrs. Thornton, and Miss Macdonald, of course; and then my lady asked Mr. Seton and all his curates; and that makes five gentlemen, without any ladies, so my lady had to ask two ladies to make up the number, so they are twelve altogether; and I never remember my lady having more than eight on Christmas Day. And I'm so glad of one thing, miss."

"What?"

"Mr. Arthur Seton's taken Miss Macdonald in to dinner. I wanted to see, so I peeped through the shrubs in the conservatory, and I saw them all cross the hall; and Miss Macdonald does look handsome to-night. She's all in white, miss, with scarlet flowers in her hair, and she does look so beautiful. She has such splendid hair. I never saw such a quantity; and then her dresses are always so beautifully made——"

"Why are you glad Mr. Arthur Seton has taken her in to dinner?" Agnes asked, suddenly cutting short her maid's professional rhapsodies.

"Oh why, because, miss, don't you know, people are beginning to wonder what we shall see before long. Didn't you know that? And we've had some talk about it downstairs, and we think it would be just the very thing. Then Mr. Arthur and Miss Macdonald might live at the rectory, and take care of Mr. Seton. He doesn't seem as if he ever meant to marry, and we all think he begins to look old and worn, and no wonder, for he does work so tremendously hard; and it must be very lonely up in that great big house there, all alone."

"But he has got Mr. Arthur with him now."

"And what's the good of two gentlemen living together, miss? They might just as well be apart. That house will never look like a home until a lady goes there, and I do begin to hope it won't be long first. Every one likes Mr. Arthur Seton so much, they say he's worthy to be the rector's cousin, and Miss Macdonald is a dear young lady. Oh, I do hope, Miss Agnes, it will come about."

Agnes did not answer. She was unusually silent that night over her toilet.

She had not been in the drawing-room very long before the ladies appeared. Her maid was right. Evelyn was looking particularly handsome. Her dress was very becoming, and she had a little more colour than usual. Agnes wondered what this latter circumstance might portend.

"Come and tell me about the decorations, Eva," she said; "I haven't heard yet. Did you carry out my design for the reredos?"

"I should think we did," Evelyn answered, laughing. "Mr. Arthur Seton insisted upon its being carried out to the letter; and it certainly looks uncommonly well. But you have no idea how difficult it was to manage it. We should never have done it but for him."

"I am glad he was so appreciative."

"Of the design, or the designer?" Evelyn asked, with a smile. "I suspect his regard for the latter had more to do with his determination than his appreciation of the former."

"Perhaps. I know he is very fond of me, and so am I of him. He is what, as a well-conducted young woman, I suppose I ought to call a most charming man; but what, lying here, a crippled Amazon, I prefer to designate as an uncommonly fine fellow. Don't you think so, Eva?"

"How can I say? I am not a crippled Amazon, you know."

"I suppose you can speak the truth all the same."

"Well, I will admit, then, that I think you have described him tolerably accurately. I like him personally, he is so manly and straightforward; and I respect him for the earnest purpose with which he throws himself heart and soul into his work."

She spoke rather coldly, and turned the subject back to the church decorations. Agnes mentally balanced, for a moment, the opinions she had avowed, against the tone and manner with which they had been expressed; and rapidly decided that, perfectly freely uttered, they should have been spoken with a little less coldness and indifference.

The fates were propitious to her that night. It so happened that during the course of the evening Harold came and sat down beside her, just at a moment when every one else was occupied.

"Agnes," he said, "now you have achieved going out, why should you not come to church?"

"Oh, Mr. Seton!"

"I don't see why you should not. Your pony carriage could drive quite up to the vestry door, and from the vestry you could hear all the service."

"But I should be in your way."

"Not in the least. There is an inner room which we use as a dressing-room. You would be in no one's way. Would you like it?"

"Like it! How can you ask?"

"You once told me you looked upon going to church as a tiresome sacrifice to respectability," he said, with a smile. He could venture to speak in that way now.

"I know I did. You need not remind me of anything said then. Not a single word of that conversation has ever slipped from my memory. Though I sometimes now can hardly believe I ever could have felt as I did then."

"Well, I shall speak to Arthur about the church arrangements, and just tell him you would like it, and then you

may consider it settled. That boy is devoted to you, Agnes. I believe if you hinted a wish to reach the top of the church tower, he would manage it some way."

"Dear old fellow, he has done, in a different way, nearly as much for me as you have. It seems very strange, doesn't it, Mr. Seton, to be able to indulge in unlimited platonic before one is five-and-twenty? But it is very pleasant."

"I should think it was an inestimable boon," he said, "and one, to secure which, some would willingly change places with you."

"Oh! surely not."

He smiled. "I don't think you could quite understand, child. Who is that singing? Oh, your sister. She has a good voice. What a pity she does not produce it better."

She understood the hint, and wondered in silence what he meant, without pressing him upon the subject.

"Look there, Mr. Seton," she suddenly said, in a low tone, after a short silence.

He looked in the direction she indicated. Evelyn Macdonald was sitting on a low seat close to the entrance into the conservatory. Arthur Seton had just gone up to her, and was standing talking to her, leaning his back against the doorpost. Both figures were well thrown out by a heavy green velvet curtain which hung in the doorway.

"Yes, that is not a bad picture," Harold said. "The colouring is good, and the position perfectly natural, and therefore artistic. Now if artists could only get such subjects as that whenever they wanted them, their figures would not leave that painful impression of 'pose,' which they often do."

"It was not that I was thinking of," Agnes said.

"What then?"

"Mr. Seton, they are just made for each other, and sometimes I think Arthur at least is beginning to find it out."

He made no answer, only sat motionless, looking steadily at them. His face was in shadow and partially turned away, so Agnes could not see it; but she felt, though she could not see. What she felt she could hardly have defined, but her heart began to beat very fast. Had she miscalculated? Would he entirely disapprove? There was certainly something wrong.

"What do you think about it, Mr. Seton?" she asked, almost timidly, after a silence of some minutes' duration.

"I never dreamed of such a thing."

The answer was low, and the tone constrained.

"But would you disapprove very much?" she asked, rather anxiously.

"What makes you think there is a chance of it?"

"I know Arthur admires her, and I don't think any one could really know her without loving her."

"And she?"

"I cannot so well tell. You know Eva is never very communicative, and on such a subject it would be very hard to find out anything. But I do know she likes him, and I cannot help thinking, if Arthur tries to win her, and she knows that he does so with a full knowledge of all the circumstances of the case, he will not be unsuccessful. I wanted to tell you about it, for I thought you ought to have warning——"

She had been going on to a full confession of her own share in the transaction, but he cut her short by rising and saying,—

"Thank you, dear child, you did well, and I am much obliged to you. Now I must go."

"Already? Why, it is quite early."

"Yes, but I cannot spare more time to-night."

"Mr. Seton, you look very grave. I hope you are not very much annoyed about this."

"Do I look very grave? I did not know it. I fancy you

are right, that they are well suited. Good night, dear child, I shall slip out quietly. Wish Lady Battersby good night for me when she is disengaged."

Agnes looked up at him wonderingly, anxiously, but she did not say a word. He left the room very quietly, yet she thought as she watched him he did not look quite himself. Could he have any reason for disapproval, though he admitted they were suited to each other? Surely she had not been wrong in thinking that Evelyn's birth would never stand against her in Harold's eyes. She felt very disturbed and uneasy, and that was a wakeful, restless night to her.

Little did Agnes Battersby dream that the simple words she had spoken that night, and which had been apparently so coldly received by her listener, had in reality signed his death-warrant, by revealing to him the state of his own feelings. "As you value your peace—as you would avoid agony such as would make all you have suffered, or ever will otherwise suffer, seem nothing by comparison—guard well that love does not take root in your heart, before you are yourself aware of it." He had thought that warning, when uttered, a needless one, against an impossible danger. Now, as he walked home through the cold frosty night air, the words seemed ringing in his ears. He had sat down by Agnes' couch that night, all unconscious that love had taken deep root in his heart; he had risen up with the full knowledge that its roots had twined themselves so closely round every fibre there, that he could never tear it out, unless he could tear out the life with it. He loved Evelyn Macdonald, and the monk was right. There was hot blood in his veins, and the passion had mastered him as he had warned him it would. Just when he had been beginning to dream of safety, he had been on the brink of destruction. Perhaps he had been a little off his guard; at any rate, the end was beginning now.

He had never dreamed that he had learned to love the girl, until the consciousness rushed over him like some mighty wave, when he heard Agnes suggest her as a fitting wife for his young cousin ; and could she have seen his face at that moment, it would have haunted her to her dying day. He had watched Evelyn with interest when she first came to Middleborough, and had been conscious, as she developed from girlhood into womanhood, that he thoroughly admired and respected her. That these feelings had been gradually and silently deepening, and changing in their colouring, he never suspected. The change had been slow and gradual. The full knowledge of it burst upon him in a single moment. It was the second great discovery which had burst over his head like a thunder-peal, and it seemed for the moment to confuse and bewilder him much as the first had done ; though through it all there was running a bitter consciousness, that the struggle before him now would make the first seem as nothing by comparison.

He sat down in his library and rested his head upon his hands. Evelyn, only Evelyn, seemed to fill his whole heart and soul. Evelyn, so pure, so good, and withal so strong and brave ; who, if she did love, would not only love so well, but so wisely. On whose breast even he might have rested his head, when weary and worn, and found not only soothing and rest, but strength. It might never be, and that consciousness was doubly bitter in her case. If there was a woman in the world whom he could have fairly asked to share his fate, whatever it might prove, it was she ; with the sad heritage entailed upon her by the sins of others. She was, only too certainly, what he possibly was himself ; a waif and stray, with no rightful claim to the name she bore ; and with the almost certain prospect of being, before many years had passed, cast adrift penniless upon the world. To find a shelter in the arms of a true

and loving husband, whatever his birth might be, could not but be a brighter lot than that. And he must put away all thought of it, and worse still, stand by and see, apparently unmoved, another try to win, and perhaps succeed in winning, the love for which he thirsted now with such a fierce, insatiable thirst; and that other the man he loved almost as a son. There seemed nothing wanting which could possibly be added to make his cup more bitter.

He had sunk almost into a stupor, when he was roused by the sound of Arthur entering the house, whistling a merry air. The sound smote him sharply. He raised his head and listened, and with a feeling of relief, heard his cousin's footsteps pass the door as he crossed the hall and ran up-stairs to his own room. He seemed very light-hearted. Could he have received some encouragement to hope his love would not prove a vain one?

Harold rose as he heard him shut his door, and walking across the room to the window, he quietly unclosed the shutters, and looked out. It was a very clear night, and that stillness which may be felt—the stillness of a frosty winter's night—was resting on all nature. The moon was shining brightly in a cloudless sky, and the grey church, with its massive buttresses and Gothic windows, stood out with a strange weird beauty in the pale cold light. He stood looking at it for a moment; then, acting upon a sudden impulse, he took up the church keys, and noiselessly leaving the house, crossed the rectory lawn and the churchyard, entered the church at the west door, and locked it after him; and then—well, no words for that. A strong man, with his strength utterly broken down for the time, is no subject for description. The grand old church would safely keep the secret entrusted to it in such full confidence. The moonlight streaming in at the side windows of the chancel, and staining the marble floor with such strange

unearthly colouring, lighted up the scene ; but there were no vulgar eyes to see, nor ears to hear. The carved saints and angels, looking down, cold, still, and white, from their niches, would never tell of the storm of human passion which had spent itself below. The sculptured knights and dames, dimly visible in the distant aisles, where they lay so calmly on their marble tombs, with hands folded on their breasts, would never tell of the sounds to which the lofty arches and massive pillars gave back their echoes that night. Could there be a more fitting place for such a storm to spend its fury—at least in the breast of such a man—than there, in the spirit's very home, with everything around to speak of spiritual life, and to bid it be strong in its fierce conflict with the flesh ; to tread it down into abject slavery ; and to stand triumphant, even though sorely wounded ?

Sounds of life were beginning to be heard through the darkness of the winter's morning when Harold Seton returned to the rectory ; and then, save that his face was very pale, and his steps slow and heavy, he looked much as he usually did.



CHAPTER XXIII.

SENT BACK TO THE FIGHT.

ARTHUR SETON made his appearance in Agnes Battersby's sitting-room the next afternoon about tea-time.

"Give me a cup of tea, Agnes," he said, "and I'll give you some news."

"What news?"

"No, I'll have the tea first," he answered, laughingly, "or I don't believe I shall get it."

"You must take it then, as there is no one here to give it you."

"Why are you alone to-day?"

"I refused visitors. I am not very well, I had a bad night. What news have you for me?"

Another time he would have made her guess, but she was evidently not in the state for anything of the kind.

"The rector has bolted," he said very quietly.

"Bolted! Arthur, what do you mean?"

"That he is gone, vanished, departed; not without leaving some trace behind, I must admit; and does not intend to be back for some weeks."

"Where is he gone?"

"I don't quite know. Somewhere abroad, I think; but he is slightly mysterious. His letters are to be sent to the Embassy at Madrid, so I suppose it is somewhere in Spain. He and the ambassador are old acquaintances, and his letters will reach him safely from there, he says."

"But, Arthur, this is very sudden."

"Well, he meant to go away, you know, for a holiday."

"Yes, but not at least until the new year was fairly in. And he did not say a word of it last night."

She had flushed a good deal, and looked very uneasy. Arthur saw it.

"Don't be alarmed, Agnes. There is nothing wrong. This is how it happened. His reverence and I did not happen to meet at breakfast this morning, a circumstance which does occasionally occur; and soon after I came down he called me into the library, where he was busy with the post-bag. He told me some unexpected business made him wish to leave at once, instead of waiting, and sent me off to convene an immediate clerical council; settled all about work in his absence; told Carr he did not think he should be away more than three weeks or a month, but that he would let him know; and went off by the train to London this afternoon. He gave me this note for you."

He handed her one as he spoke. Agnes eagerly glanced over it. It was very short.

"DEAR AGNES,—I would have seen you before leaving if possible, but it was not. I had no idea, until this morning, that I should leave to-day. Leave the subject we discussed last night to take its own course entirely. If your ideas should prove correct, well and good; but such things are better not interfered with, I think. In great haste, ever yours,
H. S."

It was very terse, but so much in the usual style of his notes that Agnes thought little of it, and she was considerably relieved. She had felt a growing dread, from the moment Arthur first told her he was gone, that what she had said the night before had something to do with his sudden departure. Did he really entirely disapprove? Could he have gone to consult Arthur's father on the subject before it was too late? These and half a dozen other similar ideas had presented themselves while Arthur spoke, but now they

vanished. If he had not thought of going until that morning, it could not be her words which had caused him to leave home so unexpectedly.

"I hope the business is not of an unpleasant nature," she said. "He tells me here he had no intention of going until this morning, but I thought last night he did not seem quite like himself. I hope there is nothing worrying him."

"I don't think so. I haven't heard of anything. I didn't notice anything unusual about him last night."

"No, I dare say not."

Arthur's colour rose. "Why not, Agnes?"

"Because you were so entirely engrossed with Eva," she calmly replied. "I hope you were occupied in sounding the rector's praises."

"No, indeed, I was doing nothing of the kind," he answered, rather sharply. "I don't think we ever mentioned his name."

"That was very wrong. You ought not to have neglected such an opportunity. Really, Arthur, I fear you are failing in your duty."

"Duty be hanged! I'm not going to be deputy in love-making. Much thanks I should get on either side."

"You are very captious to-day, Arthur."

"Am I? I am very sorry I seemed so. I really didn't intend it, Agnes."

"Well, but," persisted his tormentor, "remember your part of the compact was, that you were to sound Eva's praises in Mr. Seton's ears. Have you been doing that?"

"No, I haven't,—at least,—that is to say, not of late," and again his colour rose. "The fact is, Agnes, I am afraid of doing it. Harold is so frightfully sharp-sighted. He would see through it in a moment."

"Ah, well, perhaps it would be as well to be cautious," she answered, and then she turned the subject. She had

ascertained all she wanted to know, and felt all doubt was at an end, as far as Arthur was concerned. Nor had she very much about Evelyn ; but she had some misgivings still, and hardly knew how to act. Evelyn would never accept him unless she was certain he acted in full cognizance of all the circumstances of the case ; and if she had that certainty the chances were considerable that, believing him actuated by pity, she would follow the same course. Agnes began to perceive that where a really high-spirited woman is concerned, a matrimonial project is a most fragile thing to handle.

She tried to throw them as much together, in her own presence, as possible, that she might watch what went on, but she did not find it quite so easy as hitherto. Evelyn seemed to have many unusual reasons for finding it impossible to drive with her, and for never being at Shrublands when Arthur was likely to be there. Arthur's captious fit seemed to be rapidly becoming chronic ; he would not do what he was wanted, and was very irritable sometimes. Agnes bore it very patiently, but occasionally she did almost hint a wish, to herself, that she had never burned her fingers with match-making.

This state of things continued for something like three weeks after Harold's departure, and then Agnes thought she had really had enough of it. A *dénouement* of some sort was clearly inevitable, so she felt she could hardly be considered as violating Harold's commands if she only hastened it a little. She would no more be its cause now, than he who administers the last stroke to put a mortally wounded animal out of misery can be regarded as the cause of its death. So, one day, when Arthur came in looking very harassed and out of spirits, she took the initiative.

"Arthur, what is the matter?"

"Nothing. Why should you suppose there is?"

"You are not the least like yourself. You have not been for some weeks."

"I am a little overworked. You don't know what it is, Agnes. That fellow Harold does his work so quietly and systematically, one has not the least idea how much he does until he's gone."

"Don't fence, Arthur, in that way. Hard work would not make you look as you do. You are unhappy about something."

"Am I? You are wondrous discerning. If you know so much, perhaps you can go a little further, and tell me what I am unhappy about."

He spoke with a miserable attempt to turn her words into a jest; and with the usual palpable failure of such attempts, under the circumstances.

"Yes, I can, dear Arthur," she answered, very gently, "and I have been grieving for you. You love Eva, with just as true and deep a love as was likely to grow out of your old feelings of awe and respect for her. She is cold and reserved, so you are afraid to speak, and are very miserable. Is it not so, poor old fellow?"

"It is just so, Agnes; and I have sometimes longed to tell you about it; but I was afraid to admit what had happened, because of what you wanted."

"Did you suppose I should not find it out? Never mind, I am quite satisfied with this arrangement."

Then he poured out the whole story, as a man will only tell such a tale to a woman. He was very miserable; loving Evelyn Macdonald with all the love of a man who has never frittered away or sullied the purity of the inestimable treasure he possesses in the power to love truly and deeply; and through the barrier of her impenetrable reserve he could not pierce, to find out what his chances were: so he was afraid to speak, and as wretched as might be in silence.

Agnes listened patiently and lovingly to the whole story. "Poor old fellow!" she said again, laying her thin white

hand on his curly head, as he sat on a low stool beside her couch, "you have been very unhappy."

"Unhappy! I am miserable! What can I do?"

"Will you do what I tell you?"

"Yes, anything. Anything is better than this state of suspense. If there is no hope I had better know it at once, and go away, and try to bear it as I best may. I can't see clearly myself what it is best to do. I will abide by your decision."

"Then you must give me time for a consultation over your case."

"A consultation!" and he started up. "Agnes, you are never going to repeat what I have said to you?"

"Would it be like me? How can you ask such a question, you foolish boy?"

"But then what did you mean about a consultation?"

She smiled rather sadly. "As in water, face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man," she replied. "I stand far removed from all these things now, Arthur; but you must remember it was not always so; and the only consultation I would have is with a memory which will bring back to me, faithfully enough, thoughts and feelings which were very suddenly extinguished, and enable me to counsel you wisely how to deal with a woman."

He looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he said,—

"A woman whom I do love, it may be, far too well; but whom I never should have loved, I believe, but for——"

"But for what?"

"But for a closed turnpike gate, Agnes."

She laughed merrily enough at that. "You foolish fellow; do you really think you should have fallen in love with me?"

"I am sure I should."

"Then I tell you, you are hopelessly wrong; and were you not, you ought to canonize that gate. Eva will make you a far better wife than I should ever have done."

"*Will, Agnes? Not would?*"

"No, *will*, I think. We shall see. Come to me tomorrow. I don't think I shall sleep much to-night. I shall have plenty of time to think."

He needed no second bidding. He had a long interview with Agnes the next afternoon; and when he left he looked brighter than he had done for many a day.

And where all this time was Harold Seton? Far away in the old home of his inner life. He had spoken truly when he told Agnes he had no idea of leaving home so suddenly, until the morning of the day on which he started. The thought of flight had not occurred to him until the morning, and he had acted upon it very rapidly; hardly venturing to ask himself what were the thoughts beyond, which were beginning to cross his mind occasionally.

One morning, as Padre Felipe was occupied in fastening up some branches of the vines on the terrace, which the wind had loosened from their hold, the sound of a footstep behind him made him turn, and Harold Seton stood before him.

"My son!" he said.

"Ay, the same, father. Come back to die, I think."

The monk looked steadily at him for a moment. "No, not yet, my son. May the holy Virgin grant that when your time comes you may be called from here; but it has not come yet. What has brought you so unexpectedly?"

"I hardly know, father, myself. Unless," he added, bitterly, "it be despair."

"A good soldier of the cross never despairs. But I can well guess what has happened. My son, my son, I have prayed daily for you, that when it came—for that it would come I was certain—your faith might not fail. Do not

talk of despair, nor speak of it now. We will do so to-night in my cell. The prior and some of the brethren are near at hand."

The prior, accompanied by two of the monks, came up the steps from the beach almost at the moment. Harold was cordially welcomed; but not without many expressions of surprise and concern at his altered looks. Padre Felipe quietly parried them.

"The Señor has been working very hard," he said, "and felt the need of rest; so he has come back to us to seek it."

That night the two men again sat together in the monk's cell, and Harold told him all. And as he looked at the face before him, and thought that but eleven years had passed since last they had sat together there, and as he listened to the words so quietly spoken, Padre Felipe's own face lost all the usual sternness of its repose, and softened into a look of unutterable sadness. He did not speak. He understood it all only too well, and just for that very reason he felt how powerless words were.

"Had you never suspected you loved her until that moment, my son?" he asked at length.

"Never, never, father, as I live. I had looked on her but as a child compared with myself, and I never dreamed I had learned to love her, till I felt the sharp pang occasioned by hearing her spoken of as a fitting wife for another. Oh! father, you warned me, but I thought the warning a needless one until too late; and now I cannot tear out the love."

"You must, my son."

"I cannot. I can bear in silence, hiding the wound from every human eye, but I can never root out a love which has taken so firm a hold."

The words were spoken with more of faltering weakness than ever the monk had detected in him before. His very

heart bled, but he spoke none the less firmly, as he urged his disciple unflinchingly still to face the conflict. His power over him was, however, for the time gone. He could not rouse him from the state of utter despondency in which he seemed sunk. The monk had told him the passion, if it ever woke, would master him with tremendous force; it had done so with a power beyond even what he had expected.

The very night that Agnes Battersby was anxiously considering how best to advise Arthur Seton in his perplexities was the last of Harold's stay at the monastery, and then, for the first time, he falteringly spoke of what had been in his mind all along.

"Father, it is useless to urge me to face it. I must do it for a time, but it cannot be for long. I must resign."

"What, my son?"

"Resign. Give up the work, and——"

And what? He did not know himself. He had no heart even to strive to look forward into the gloomy future.

"Turn back, after having put your hand to the plough? My son! my son!"

"I cannot face it, father," he said, almost imploringly.

"My son, your own admissions show that you have done, and are doing, good service for your Master there, where He has sent you. Who will fill your vacant place?"

"There are many good men who would be ready to do it."

"But could they do your work? Could they come, as strangers, and hold the influence you have gained? Ask yourself the question; would you not be leaving your work unfinished, and in a state in which none other could carry it on as you can?"

He made no answer.

"You know it is so," Padre Felipe said, almost sternly. "Then go back, my son, and like a good soldier stand firm

at your post, until the voice of your Master himself shall speak your release."

"I cannot bear it, father."

"No cross was ever laid on man with which the strength did not come to bear it. Through all these years you have fought the fight, well and bravely. Will you turn your back upon it now because it waxes hotter?"

Harold did not answer, and after watching him in silence for a few moments, Padre Felipe continued; urging him by every argument he could bring to bear upon the subject, to go back to his work, and bravely face the trial, however fiery it might be. At last Harold rose.

"Father," he said, "you have conquered. I will be guided by your advice. I knew it was weak, but——"

"But the hour of weakness is past. There are always such hours in the life of every man. Happy they who have the courage to forbear acting upon resolutions formed in such hours. It is a great sacrifice, my son, and it will be accepted of Him for the love of whom it is made."

Harold Seton left the monastery the next day.

"Brother," the prior said, as they stood together on the terrace, after bidding him good-bye, "that young man is fearfully altered since we first knew him. His work must be very severe to have aged him so much, even in eleven years. He has changed more during that time than either you or I, whose sand must be running fast now. He will not live very long at that rate."

"He will not live long, father. The end is not far distant; but it will not be his work which will kill him."

"What then?"

Padre Felipe looked out over the sea with an absent look for a moment. Then he said,—

"The law in the members is warring fiercely against the law of the mind, and both flesh and spirit, in him, are very strong. The spirit will conquer; but it will not be able to

subdue without killing. The flesh will not yield until its very life is crushed out !”

And to that deadly conflict he had sent back his beloved son. It was in his eyes a splendid and meritorious sacrifice, which might atone for the errors of his creed, and brighten the crown for which he felt certain, in a few years at best, the cross would be exchanged. To Harold Seton it was simply the firm resolve of a true soldier of the cross to stand steady at his post to the last, for pure love of his leader, with no thought of reward to come. But, at any rate, by different routes, both men had reached the same practical result ; and in that moment of weakness the more erring had strengthened the less, and given him courage to make a resolution in which perchance, but for that, he might have failed.



CHAPTER XXIV.

EVELYN MACDONALD SUCCUMBS TO CIRCUMSTANCES.

To the very letter Arthur Seton acted on Agnes Battersby's advice. It was not very hard for him to find an opportunity; Mrs. Thornton rarely came down-stairs much before luncheon, and Major Thornton was always out of the way in the morning; so he was certain, at any time before two o'clock, if she was not at home, to find Evelyn Madonald alone.

It was rather difficult to bring his courage up to the point, but his temperament rendered suspense harder to him than anything else, and Agnes had greatly raised his spirits, he had such unbounded confidence in her. Still, the position of a man going to offer heart and hand to a woman, when he is by no means certain that both will not be coolly rejected, is not at all an enviable one.

Evelyn was at home, and alone in the drawing-room, when he entered. Then the courage of desperation began to come over him, and he felt cool and collected. He fancied she suspected what was coming. Her colour was unsteady, and she was not so calm and self-possessed as usual.

He urged his suit as a man should urge such a suit, without affectation or sentimentality; telling his love with manly straightforward frankness. It was too true and deep to need varnishing, and he did not attempt it.

Evelyn listened in silence, but she grew very pale; a sort of rigid look gathered over her face, and he could see her

hands were very tightly clenched. She heard him out without interrupting him. Then she spoke.

"Mr. Seton, I am very sorry for this. I dreaded it might come, and I have striven, as far as was possible, to hold you back from it. I can give you no hope."

Strange fact; but Arthur's spirits rose. He had been well schooled. The words were spoken in a cold, constrained tone, not natural to her under such circumstances. Evelyn, so generous and true-hearted, would, unless under some very strong pressure, have been so tender and so gentle in rejecting such a love.

"No hope, Miss Macdonald!" he said.

"No, none, Mr. Seton."

"Is that decision irrevocable? I will wait very patiently, if you will only promise you will try to love me some day."

"I could not make such a promise. Please end this interview. Don't think me abrupt and unfeeling for asking it, but indeed you do not know how inexpressibly painful it is to me."

Her tone was almost imploring, and she was growing paler every moment.

"Miss Macdonald," he said, "you have told me you could give me no hope. If to that assurance you will add, in plain words, that you do not, and never could love me, I will leave your presence in a moment, and never voluntarily enter it again."

Silence. He waited in vain for a reply.

"Will you not answer me?" he asked.

"I have told you," she said, in a low tone, "I could give you no hope. That assurance takes from you all right to ask any further questions."

"It does nothing of the kind," he replied. "I have offered you as true and honest a love as man ever offered to woman. The man who does that has an undeniable right to ask, in return, for a truthful answer to the question I

have asked. That right I claim, Miss Macdonald, and I will not go until I have that answer."

Silence still—and he was growing bolder every moment.

"Why will you not answer me?"

"I cannot," she faintly said.

He sat down beside her, and gently taking one icy hand in his, he said,—

"Evelyn, shall I tell you why you cannot? You cannot because you will not tell the truth, and you cannot tell a falsehood. You do love me, I know you do. It is no love you need blush to own. Have I not sought to win it by every means in my power? But you will not own it because you believe I have sought to win you in ignorance of circumstances which you fancy might alter my feelings; and you are too noble, too honourable, to take advantage of such an ignorance. It is not so. I know the whole sad history of your life, and it only makes you dearer to me than ever."

"You pity me, in fact," she bitterly said, "and have generously resolved to take me out of a painful position."

"I do nothing of the kind. I simply love you with my whole heart. I loved you before I knew of this, though I did not know myself I did; and if the knowledge made any difference to my feelings at all, it was simply to give me a sort of pleasure in the thought that, could I win you, you would be more entirely mine than under other circumstances. Now, Evelyn, dear Evelyn, answer me truly. Do you, or do you not, love me? I know you do, but I want to hear you say it."

"I do love you."

There was but one answer he could make to that. But he had to pass his arm hastily round her for another reason. Almost as she spoke she dropped heavily on his shoulder. The self-possessed Evelyn Macdonald had fainted. For long she had been silently training herself for a great and a

painful sacrifice; for she did love him dearly; and the sudden revulsion of feeling produced by finding the necessity for it swept away in a moment was too much for her.

It was but for a moment. She was herself again in a few seconds. Then he made her tell him all the story of her early life, and in truth he almost shuddered at some parts of it. The advent of Mrs. Thornton, ten minutes before luncheon, was the first thing which brought them back to this world.

Mrs. Thornton was radiant. She had had hopes for some time, but she had too much woman's wisdom not to leave what had begun without her help, to go on without her interference; and conscious what a whisper may effect, under such circumstances, she had not breathed a hint upon the subject, even to her husband.

Arthur, in a state of temporary insanity, burst in upon Agnes soon after luncheon, and throwing himself down upon his knees beside her couch, bestowed a shower of kisses upon her.

"Get up, and behave yourself, you savage," she said. "I need not ask what has happened."

"Oh, Agnes! you are inspired. It was just as you said. She would not have me because she thought I didn't know, and when she found I did, she was in a fair way, I believe, to persist in her refusal, because she thought I had proposed because I pitied her. But it is all right now, and I am perfectly mad—positively drunk with happiness."

"You need not tell me that. Look at my hair."

He coloured furiously.

"Oh, Agnes, I beg your pardon a thousand times! I am very sorry. I didn't mean to be so rough. What a brute you must think me!"

"I know you, my dear Arthur, to be a man violently in love, and just accepted, and that is quite enough to account for anything. Where is Eva?"

"She is coming presently."

She came before long ; very composed and undemonstrative, but with a wondrous depth of quiet bliss in her dark eyes, and an indefinable expression of peace about her whole bearing.

But the perfect unalloyed bliss of true love is never destined to be of very long duration. That very evening, when he went home, after dining at the Thorntons, and sat down in the library to consider, as calmly as might be, his position, little clouds began to sweep across his sunny sky. The subject had two sides from which it might be regarded, and it was not quite so rosy on the one as it was on the other. He was engaged to a girl whom he loved devotedly, and who would be, he knew, a treasure beyond all price to the man who won her. So far it was very bright ; but then came over him the remembrance of the necessity of writing at once to inform his father of what had happened, and that brought to view the reverse of the medal. If he dwelt upon all Evelyn's perfections, his father would, he knew, regard it in the light of lovers' rhapsodies, and glance on to find the less romantic part of the tale, which must be that she had no fortune, and that avowal must be supplemented by the story of her birth. Ralph Seton had some of the strong feelings of old hereditary rank, and Arthur knew that quite well. Supposing he made very strong objections, what would Evelyn, with her high spirit, think and do ? It was a more serious stumblingblock even than her want of fortune, though that was no slight impediment, considering what his own profession was, and that his father had a large family. Altogether, by the time he had meditated over his affairs for an hour, poor Arthur began to feel rather dismal, and thought he would put off writing to his father until the next day.

As he got up, with the intention of going to bed, his eye fell upon letters lying upon the table, which had arrived

during his absence, and he turned them over. There was one for him in Harold's writing. He hastily opened it. It was only to say his cousin would be home in about three days. Arthur stood reflecting, with the open letter in his hand, and his face brightened a little.

"Yes, that will be the best thing," he said aloud at last, and then he went up to his room.

What would be the best thing? None other than to wait until his cousin's return; plead his cause with him; and persuade him to use his influence with Ralph on the subject. Arthur knew the extraordinary respect his father had for Harold, a respect almost amounting to veneration, and, ignorant of its cause, he had often wondered at it. It would stand him in good stead now. If he could only win his cousin over to his side, and about that he had no great fears, he was certain his influence with his father would be all-powerful; and with the thought Arthur went off to sleep not a little consoled.

"Harold, old fellow, I have a piece of unexpected intelligence for your reverence," he said, the evening of Harold's arrival at the rectory.

"That you and Miss Macdonald are engaged?" Harold asked, very quietly.

Arthur looked at him in astonishment. "Who told you?" he asked.

"My own eyes, before I left," he replied, without raising them from the book, the pages of which he was cutting. "I fully expected to hear it when I returned."

Then Arthur told the whole story of his doubts and fears and ultimate success. Harold never moved. He went on slowly and steadily, cutting page after page, without ever looking up.

"Why don't you congratulate me?" Arthur asked.

"Your good fortune, my dear boy, is too evident to need congratulation. No one who knows Miss Macdonald can

fail to appreciate it. You have won the heart of a noble woman, Arthur. See that you deserve to possess her."

His voice was slightly tremulous—that was all.

"How can any man be worthy of such a woman?"

"By loving her with a true and pure love; and by letting her love elevate and purify his whole moral tone, as it should do; and that is, as nothing else in this world can. The man who does that, is worthy to have such a woman for his own, whatever other advantages he may lack. But, Arthur, what does your father say?"

"Ah, that is the rub! I haven't ventured to tell him yet, I wanted to consult you. You know what the governor is, and you see she has no fortune; and then about her mother, too. It's the only hitch in the whole business."

"Still you must write to your father, and you ought to do so at once."

"Yes, I know, but I thought——"

"Thought what?"

"Why, just this, old fellow: that your influence with my father is all-powerful. If you'll stand by us, and urge him to consent——. Hulloo, what's the matter?"

"Only a sudden start and shiver—nothing," Harold said. "Go on, finish your sentence."

"If you'll urge him to consent, I don't believe he'll say much against it. Otherwise I'm afraid he will be rather put out."

"I don't think I can interfere."

He did not think so. He had nerved himself for passive endurance, but not for lending his influence to give the woman he loved into the arms of another.

Arthur's bright face clouded over. "Oh, why not, Harold? You're my main stay. I never thought you would fail me. You're the universal refuge in all troubles. When any one comes to grief it's always 'Do go to the rector.' That poor girl down in Driver's Lane told me, only the other day, she

should have committed suicide but for you. She had actually got the poison. And I didn't think you would refuse to help me in my troubles."

Harold got up.

"I must go to bed now, my boy. I am thoroughly knocked up. I made a tremendous forced journey. I'll talk more to you of this another time."

"Upon my word, I am awfully selfish. I suppose men in love always are. You do look dead beat. You're as white as a sheet, and I've been keeping you talking here. Have something before you go to bed, Harold. I am sure you are ill."

A momentary feeling of faintness had come over him, and made him sit down again.

"I believe I have done a little too much. Get me some brandy, Arthur. The servants are all gone to bed, I dare say."

Arthur went in search of the brandy, and Harold, with his face hidden in his hands, sat shivering like an aspen leaf. He was still, however, by the time Arthur returned.

"Thanks, lad," he said, as he took the brandy, "I shall be all right to-morrow." And they separated.



CHAPTER XXV.

VOLUNTARY MARTYRDOM.

SOON after breakfast the next morning, Harold Seton called Arthur into the library. He said he had got over the effects of his journey, and felt much better. But Arthur thought the effects of the night's rest were not very perceptible. Moreover, he had not slept particularly well himself, and he had, whenever he was awake, heard sounds occasionally from Harold's room, indicating that some one was moving about there.

"Now let us consider your affairs," Harold said. "I am not going to keep you on the rack longer than may be. You must not delay any longer letting your father know what has happened, Arthur. Remember, any appearance of reticence, on such a subject, is, to a certain extent, casting a slur on Miss Macdonald."

"Call her Eva, Harold. Miss Macdonald sounds so cold. I shall think you don't approve either. And, in truth, that would touch me nearer than the governor's disapprobation."

"All in good time. At present I prefer calling her by the name by which I have been used to address her. You see the necessity for communicating with your father at once."

"I do, most clearly."

"And your father will not approve, Arthur, I am certain. I do not mean, for a moment, that I think he would disapprove of Miss Macdonald, personally; but you know, in her case, that does not exhaust the subject."

"No, I know. I am quite well aware of my father's prejudices. But you don't disapprove, Harold, do you?"

"I think whoever wins Miss Macdonald will be a most fortunate man. But keep to the business part of the subject. Your father must be informed, and will disapprove. What then?"

"I must do without his approval."

Harold made no answer. He sat as if considering for some moments. Then he said,—

"Arthur, do you love her as she deserves to be loved?"

"Need you ask that question? A man can but give his whole heart and soul to the woman he asks to be his wife, and worship as well as love her."

"Then," Harold continued, in a low tone, "if I smooth away the difficulties from your path, overcome your father's objections, and perhaps give you even further aid in the accomplishment of your wishes, will you, in return, pledge me your word that you will be to Miss Macdonald all that the husband of such a woman should be?"

"I will, so help me God, as far as it is in my power. You have no need to ask such a promise, Harold. No shade of sorrow or trouble shall ever darken her life which it is in my power to avert from her. Her love for me shall do all which you yourself said the love of such a woman ought to do for a man; mine for her shall be her shield from all the storms of life, or her support, if they must come. What more can I promise?"

He spoke in a manly, earnest tone, which struck all trace of sentiment out of his words. It was the truth, spoken from his very heart, and it needed no affirmation to convince that he would stand to his words for life.

"It is enough," Harold replied, "you are worthy of her; and you shall have my help. Write to your father, Arthur, to-day, and plead your own cause; and let me have your letter."

“Will you write as well?”

“No; I will plead your cause in person.”

“Harold! Will you really?”

“Yes; I will go to Rookwood to-morrow, see your father, and talk the matter over with him. I don't mean to say that I shall be able entirely to overcome his prejudices; but I have no doubt I can induce him to consent.”

Arthur was speechless. His cousin had more than fulfilled his utmost expectations in making such a promise.

“But mind,” Harold continued, “you will have to wait most likely—probably for two or three years.”

“Ten, if you like.”

“No, not ten, nor anything like it.”

“Oh, Harold! you don't know what a weight you have lifted off me. I was so afraid what Eva might do.”

“How so?”

“If she had found my father objected on the score of her birth, I believe she would have thrown me over. She has such a spirit, and she is fearfully sensitive on that point. Poor darling, no one knows what she has gone through. But I say, Harold, old fellow, I have a double reason for being grateful to your reverence on the score of my love affairs.”

“Have you?”

“Indeed I have. I have to thank you for being so proof against the tender passion yourself. You have no idea what an admiration and respect Eva has for you. She says you are almost too near the ideal type of man to be entirely human. I am quite certain, if you had taken it into your head to be my rival, I should not have had a chance; and so I told her one day, when she was talking about you.”

“What did she say?”

Why did he ask? It was a useless question, and yet he thirsted for the answer.

“Well, she didn't deny it; but at the same time, she so framed her answer that it was eminently satisfactory to my feelings.”

“That's the five minutes chime,” Harold said, rising. “You had better write your letter instead of coming to church this morning. There is a tremendous lot to be done this afternoon; you won't have time to do it then, and I should like to start for Rookwood early to-morrow.”

Arthur hesitated. Evelyn would be at morning prayers. “I can write it to-night,” he said. “You had better let me come and help you with the service. None of the other fellows will be there.”

“I can read quite well myself. You have the evening service at the West Mission Room to-night.”

“But I could write when I come home.”

“If I go to Rookwood to-morrow, you must take the Friday morning lecture at St. Peter's. You can't do that without time for preparation.”

“Hang it!” Arthur exclaimed, almost petulantly.

“The course of true love never did run smooth,” Harold replied, with a smile.

Arthur coloured at being thus unmasked, and with a half-laugh went off to his own study, while Harold went and read prayers, gravely and calmly, with Evelyn Macdonald only a few yards from him, on the opposite side of the chancel.

The congregation dispersed after prayers, engaged in various comments upon the rector. He did not seem much better for the change and rest he had had; at least he did not look it. He was very pale, and looked very worn and old, and his manner seemed to have grown rather cold and stern to what it had been.

Evelyn was walking down the lime walk, a shade disappointed, perhaps, when Harold himself overtook her. There was a quiet, but to him very perceptible change in her face since he had last seen her.

"Good morning, Miss Macdonald," he said, "I am come to be welcomed home."

"You have no need to seek that," she said, cordially holding out her hand; "you know how welcome you always are."

He took her hand, but rather coldly. "Still, one likes to receive the assurance of it," he replied. "I did not, however, come entirely for that, but also to crave forgiveness."

"Forgiveness! For what?"

"For having, in a fit of rectorial sternness, insisted upon a certain person staying at home this morning to write a letter instead of coming to read prayers. Do you know, I never felt before so conscious of being unwelcome in my own church."

Evelyn coloured. "It is not fair of you to say that."

"I don't know what to say to you, Miss Macdonald," Harold went on. "As a relative of Arthur's, it hardly seems to me fitting that I should congratulate you. Still I will venture to say you have chosen wisely. Arthur is a fine fellow; and I shall hope now even more for him than I could have done hitherto. I can most truthfully congratulate him; and I can feel very confident for your happiness, in which I can assure you I feel no slight interest."

"But, Mr. Seton, I—I wanted so much to speak to you. I don't like to say anything to Arthur. I cannot feel quite happy about it. What will his family say? I never can forget, you know."

She spoke hurriedly and nervously.

"It is to his father Arthur is writing now," Harold replied; "I will speak very plainly to you, Miss Macdonald. I know my cousin will have some prejudices to be overcome, but they will be overcome."

Evelyn turned very pale. "Mr. Seton," she said, firmly, "I will never enter any family who consider my so doing a disgrace to them."

"You cannot help yourself now," he replied.

"Not?"

"Certainly not. You have pledged your word to Arthur to be his wife. That promise you can never, with honour, take back, unless either Arthur himself releases you, or forfeits his right to claim the promise by some misconduct. Therefore I say you cannot help yourself."

She was silent. Apparently this was a new view of the case to her.

"Besides, Miss Macdonald, by such a step you would be gratifying—shall I say it?—your own pride at the expense of a fearful blow to Arthur, and one which would, I am certain, inflict upon him an irreparable moral injury. But you must not think of that. I have admitted the truth to you because I thought it best to do so. You need have no fears, however. I am going to be the bearer myself of Arthur's letter to his father, and plead his cause. I have very great influence with my cousin, and can, moreover, put this subject before him in a light no one else can. I have no doubt I shall return bearing to Arthur his father's full sanction; and I do not hesitate to say that when my cousin makes your personal acquaintance, his last lingering scruples will disappear."

Evelyn looked up with tears in her eyes. "You have always been my refuge in trouble, Mr. Seton."

A strange smile crossed, almost distorted, his face.

"This is the last time," he said. "Hereafter you will have a more efficient refuge. Now I wish you good morning; I have much to do to-day."

He raised his hat and turned away, almost abruptly. The same feeling of faintness he had experienced the night before was beginning to steal over him, and he would not have her see it.

Why had he taken upon him the extra burden? From pure love of Evelyn Macdonald. That love which shrinks

from no sacrifice for the sake of the object of it. She did not suspect, and never should suspect, the truth. She loved Arthur; he was worthy of her; a happy marriage would be, to her especially, an inestimable boon; and Arthur would give to her life all the happiness the true, honest, manly love of a good husband can shed upon a woman's life. Nor, in fact, would the barrier between them then be more impassable than it was at the present moment. And so foreseeing a possible danger, he had pleaded Arthur's cause with Evelyn, and was now going to plead it with his father. It was a horrible martyrdom, and perhaps entirely beyond most men; but he was inured to silent endurance.

Evelyn was not quite satisfied with her interview. There was a certain constraint about his manner which she had felt, and from which she shrank with a sensitive dread that it arose from his own disapproval of the marriage, although he looked upon it as inevitable. Still his reasoning had had the weight he intended it should. Before there was any chance of a strain upon her pride, the fact had taken deep root in Evelyn's mind that she was irrevocably bound to Arthur, unless that should come to pass which was at least morally impossible.

Arthur's letter was written by the time Harold reached the rectory, and then with a smile he suggested that he had better go to Major Thornton's at once. He might lunch there before he went off for his afternoon's work, and thus indemnify himself for his morning's disappointment. Arthur obeyed with great alacrity, and thus his cousin got rid of him.

The evening of the following day Ralph and Harold Seton were holding deep and earnest counsel in the library at Rookwood. Harold had never been in that room since the memorable night he had spent in it so many years before. In fact, he had never been at Rookwood at all

since the fortnight he had stayed there after leaving the fatal papers with his cousin in London. He had always shrunk from the thought of going there, with the feeling that it would make all that was so painful seem so much more vivid. Now he never gave it a thought. Every feeling was so absorbed with the present, that even the connection between it and the past seemed almost banished from his mind.

Ralph Seton was not a little disturbed by the information his cousin brought.

"I am really horribly annoyed, Harold. I speak plainly, because I so fully believe your assertion that you never suspected it yourself until too late to interfere; so my words cannot seem to reflect upon you. Arthur has not acted rightly. He is such a young fellow; he ought not to have entangled himself in an imprudent engagement without the knowledge of his family."

Entangled himself in an imprudent engagement—when the object of it was Evelyn Macdonald! Harold bit his lip.

"You would not speak in that way, Ralph, if you knew Miss Macdonald."

"Yes I should, for a most imprudent engagement it is. I dare say she may be all you say. There is no man whose judgment about a woman I would sooner take. But that does not the less make her the natural daughter of a dissipated Scotchman—why, I remember that fellow Macdonald years ago in London, and a most uncommon scamp he was.—nor alter the fact that she has absolutely no fortune at all. They will not be able to marry for years, and I hate long engagements. Altogether, I am thoroughly annoyed."

"I don't see why they should be unable to marry for so long, Ralph. You can quite well make it possible for them to do so at once, as far as that goes."

"Ay, make them an allowance; let them marry; have half a dozen children; then the shifting wheel of fortune

bring to light unexpected discoveries, and I find myself unable to continue it. That is not the sort of suggestion I expected from you, Harold."

"Ralph," Harold answered, very earnestly, "I fancy you know I am not given to mere idle assertions. That if I positively declare an intention, you may be sure it is a fixed and unalterable one."

"Unquestionably, I should say; but what has that to do with the subject?"

"Just this. That nothing now will ever alter my position. Were all this mystery cleared up in my favour to-morrow, it would make no difference to me. I should still live and die the lonely man I have been so long. Act therefore in this matter as if I did not exist."

Ralph shook his head. "There are so many contingencies, Harold. You might outlive me."

"There are no contingencies. Whatever you can do with the property I could do; and you don't suppose I would not endorse a step to which I had urged you? The only difference a clearance of the mystery could make would be, that, were I proved the son of Sir Miles Seton, Arthur should have, by will, the whole of my mother's fortune. Ralph, now for the first and last time in my life, I ground a claim upon you on what I have done for you. I claim your sanction to this marriage, and such arrangements as shall enable it to take place within another year or so. You cannot refuse."

It was putting the case strongly, and Ralph felt he must give in. The business part of the question did not need much discussion. Arthur need not wait so long as Harold had warned him he might have to do. Ralph promised his consent to the marriage in the course of another year, and a handsome allowance to the young couple. Harold accomplished even more than that. He returned to Middleborough the following day, bearing a really cordial letter

from Mrs. Seton to Evelyn, and an invitation to pay her a visit shortly at Rookwood.

It was hard to bear Arthur's frantic joy. Harder still to stand unmoved before the look of love and gratitude in Evelyn's eyes, and Harold left them together and went to Shrublands.

"Oh, Mr. Seton!" Agnes said when she saw him.

"What?"

"I feared, when Arthur told me of your abrupt departure, something was wrong; but how dreadfully ill you look!"

"I look what I feel then, Agnes. You were right. The intelligence which compelled me to leave home so suddenly was most painful, and I have suffered much since. However, now the shock is over, I shall soon mend. Do you know what I have been doing since I returned?"

"Yes, Arthur told me. Smoothing the course of true love. Have you been successful? I am anxious to know."

"Very successful." And then he told her all; so quietly, and expressing so much satisfaction at his own success, that Agnes's last lingering fears on the subject of her match-making schemes died out, and she felt very triumphant, though a little disappointed at finding there was no chance of the fulfilment of the second part of the project, that Arthur and Evelyn should live at the rectory, and cheer Harold's lonely life.



CHAPTER XXVI.

DISTANT MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM.

THE WORST was over now, in one sense ; in another, it was yet to come. Harold had nothing to do but to endure passively. But who will venture to say that that is not, in the end, more trying than to stand firm under the shock of a sudden blow? Middleborough had much to say about the rector. He was wonderfully changed within the last year ; he was not at all the man he had been. What could be the cause?

"I don't think it is very hard to divine that, Mrs. Williams," one of her visitors said to her one morning. "I think all Middleborough sees pretty clear what is wrong."

"It is more than I do, then."

"Is it really? it seems to me so clear. Mr. Seton may have appeared to alter more during the last year than he has done before ; but it is as clear as possible that he has never been the same man since poor Miss Battersby's accident."

"Well, I can assure you," Mrs. Williams replied, "neither Mr. Williams nor I ever did believe that story."

"Then you are an exception to all the place. You may depend it is so, and that's just why Mr. Seton has never married. Just think how grey his hair has grown since then. And no doubt, now that Mr. Arthur Seton and Miss Macdonald are engaged, it makes him feel it all the more strongly. I can assure you every one says the same."

Every one—at least, every one who had anything to say about it—did say the same, and the idle story stood Harold Seton in good stead. He went on steadily and quietly with

his work ; but it was becoming, as he had himself expressed a fear it would, very mechanical.

Padre Felipe had pressed him too hard. He had sent him back to do what was beyond his strength. It did not immediately appear that it was so ; but by degrees he began to feel conscious himself that he was sinking into a sort of mental and moral stupor ; going on systematically with what he had been accustomed to do, but scarcely conscious himself that he was doing it.

Evelyn Macdonald was sorely disappointed. Next to the deep love she bore Arthur, the thought connected with her engagement to him which had given her the greatest satisfaction was that it would give her all the claim of relationship upon Harold ; and now it was so different from what she had expected. She could not think, in the face of his determined espousal of hers and Arthur's cause, that he disapproved of the marriage, and yet there was a sort of coldness and constraint about him which chilled her, and prevented her from feeling thoroughly at her ease with him. He was always very kind and gentle ; but there was a barrier beyond which she could not pass. She had felt far more thoroughly at her ease with him before there had been any thought of her ever bearing his name, and being related to him by marriage.

Arthur saw it too, though he would fain have persuaded Evelyn she was the victim of a lively imagination, in fancying Harold different, in any way, from what he had always been, and it grieved him. Strange it seemed that neither should ever have dreamed of the possible truth. But just so blind people are, in affairs in which they are personally interested.

Weeks rolled on, until a dry, cold, unseasonable spring had passed into a wet, unhealthy summer, and then the alarm began to be sounded. The harvest could not fail to be a very poor one, even if it was not a total failure ; and almost with the first warning note everything began to rise in price.

"Agnes," Arthur asked one day, "when will there be a chance, do you suppose, of funds enough being raised to begin to build a decent hospital?"

"I don't know about that, Arthur. In fact, I have heard very little about it for some time. Who has been doing anything in the matter?"

"Well, Harold chiefly, but I don't think he has done much about it of late. Of course there are no end of difficulties. A site, for one."

"What made you ask the question just now?"

"Because I strongly suspect we shall sorely need it before this year is out. Harold has always said, and Dr. Hartley bears him out in the opinion, that if ever we had a very unhealthy season, united with high prices, we should be certain to have a fearful outburst of typhus fever in the low parts of the town. Now that is just what is coming to pass. The bad spring has injured the crops; this wet summer is increasing the mischief; and people are beginning to cry out already about the harvest. We only want an unhealthy autumn to complete the whole thing, and then we shall see."

"But, Arthur, if that is the case, now is the time to act, before the mischief is begun."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Exactly, my dear Agnes. But did you ever find it possible to persuade people to take time by the forelock? I've talked to the corporation about it, so have the other fellows, and Harold himself has laid it into them pretty strongly. But as to getting them to do anything more than meet occasionally, and pass resolutions, it's not to be accomplished. They won't do anything more until the first case of typhus is reported, and then, when it is too late, I dare say they'll put their shoulders to the wheel in good earnest."

"Well, that is more than they would have done some years ago."

"Possibly, but rather a poor prospect all the same. It seems to me, as far as I can make out, that you have never had a regular outburst of any epidemic; so probably the mischief would be enormously increased by a regular panic."

"I don't think we have," Agnes said, "not for many years. I remember once, years ago, when I was quite a little child, the cholera came, and there was a frightful panic. We went away to Scarborough directly, and stayed there till it was all over, so I don't know very much about it. I dare say I should hardly have remembered the particulars if we had stayed, but I know it was not very severe. At that time the town was much smaller, and there was no overcrowding as there is now."

"That just makes all the difference. Well, we shall see. If it does come, Agnes, it will set them all on the move; and if some one of any consequence falls a victim to it, perhaps something will be done."

"How soon will it be likely to come?"

"That depends upon the season. It will be whenever the autumn fairly sets in. There is always a good deal of low fever about those parts of the town then, and that will be the trying time."

"But, Arthur, do you really look upon it as inevitable? You speak almost as if you did."

"I don't look upon it as inevitable exactly, but as extremely probable; and the doctors are of the same opinion."

"And the infirmary holds about forty patients?" Agnes said.

"About that. Perhaps upon an emergency they might manage to take in sixty, but that would be the outside."

The prospect was not a cheering one, certainly. Harold had taken the matter in hand with all his old firmness, if not entirely with all his old energy. The corporation met to consult over the possibility of taking some precautionary measures, passed many resolutions, and finally appointed a

committee to visit the part of the town in question, and report upon its condition and requirements at their next meeting.

Harold Seton undertook to be their pioneer. Some such guidance was necessary, if they were to see the worst parts of the town. Without it they would hardly have been safe, and he boldly told them so.

"Dear! dear! Mr. Seton, why, that is as bad as London. You don't mean there are such places in Middleborough?"

"Most decidedly I do, and I will show them to you. There are courts and lanes here rivaling anything I ever saw in London."

That member of the town council had so severe a cold on the day appointed for their official visit, that he was obliged to be absent.

With a feeling of triumph at having at last, as far as three members of the corporation were concerned, substituted personal knowledge for mere report, Harold Seton led the way to those dens which had lain so heavy on his heart ever since he had been rector of Middleborough. They passed along several narrow lanes, taking an occasional court on their way, where slatternly women were lounging at their doors; where ragged children were playing among decaying heaps of vegetable matter and refuse fish; and where, in dark corners, were lurking idle ruffians, whose appearance spoke loudly enough for the advantage to the intruders of some such presence as the rector's. Most of the lanes ran down towards the river. Harold had purposely chosen the time of a high tide for the visit; and far up more than one lane, where the slope was gradual, the water was flooding up the gutters, bearing with it all the filth and refuse scattered around, and in many places pouring down into those courts the level of which was lower than the lanes into which they opened.

"I dare say, gentlemen," Harold said, "you can quite

imagine the result, after the tide has turned, and all that soaked mass of filth begins to dry in the sun."

He spoke with a touch of irony in his tone. He felt rather bitter to think that more than seven years of labour and protestation on his part had produced so little result.

"Horrible! horrible!" exclaimed one of his companions. "I never dreamed things were so bad here."

"It is a case of 'things seen,' then, against 'things heard.' I am sure I have told you often enough. Now I ask you just to picture to yourself the consequence of typhus fever getting a firm hold in such a place as this."

"Horrible! horrible!" they repeated, in chorus.

"Then you must remember," Harold continued, "all these houses are crammed to the very roof. I could give you statistics of the numbers in some, only you don't know the size of the houses."

"Couldn't we get into some of them?" Like men of their class, once fairly dragged into their work, they were beginning to warm to it.

"I don't know about that. I could go, easily enough. But these people don't like being subjected to domiciliary visits. They have a horror of improvements, because the first step is ejection. There's one house down in this court we might try," he added. "The woman who keeps it has seen better days, and been dragged down to this by a drunken husband. We'll go and talk to her."

It was a wretched den. Yet the faded respectability of its mistress seemed to linger about it, and give it an air of less squalid misery than hung over its neighbours.

"Is your husband out, Mrs. Marks?" Harold asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then will you let these gentlemen come in?"

The woman hesitated, and eyed them somewhat suspiciously.

"What for?" she asked.

"To please me, Mrs. Marks. I'll guarantee you don't suffer for it. They want to see what these places are like."

"Yes, sir. I'll let them in to please you, any day. Only you mustn't stay very long, gen'lemen. If Marks were to come home, he'd flay us all alive, pretty well, if so be as I think, and you're 'spectors."

"Not exactly, but something like it. We won't stay a moment longer than you give us leave."

She led the way to her one wretched room. When she, Harold, and the three others were in it there was little enough room to spare.

"How many of you live in this room?" Harold asked.

"Marks, and me, and three children."

"And all the rooms above are about the same size?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what number of lodgers are there in each?" one of the committee asked.

The woman hesitated.

"Come, speak out, Mrs. Marks," Harold said, kindly. "Don't be afraid. I know you are not afraid to trust me. I'll guarantee you against any trouble from speaking the truth, and make good to you any loss it may occasion you."

Thus assured, Mrs. Marks spoke out, and gave a list of lodgers, of all ages and sex, crammed together in a way which made her listeners shudder.

"I wish we could get into some of these rooms," one of them said.

"It ain't no sort of use to try it, sir. There's never one of 'em as would let you inside their doors. If it was his reverence alone it would be all right. But the sight of you gen'lemen would just scare 'em all into their dens in a moment."

"Don't you think you could manage, some way, just to let these gentlemen get a general look at the state of the house, Mrs. Marks?" Harold asked. "There is a great deal

for which you are not responsible, you know, which I should like them to see."

The woman thought for a few moments. Then she said,—

"Well, sir, I don't know. Perhaps I could get ye a sight of one garret. It wouldn't show much for crowding, for there's but one there; but I think, perhaps, she'd not mind your coming in, because she ain't likely to be here long, and if a row came of it she wouldn't care; and you might chance getting a look at some of the other places as you passed. I suppose you'd give her a trifle?"

"Yes. I'll give her five shillings, if she'll let us in."

"Then just wait a minute, and I'll go and ask her."

She returned in a few moments. "It's all right, gen'lemen, you can come up.—Jack, where are you?"

A ragged urchin appeared at the call.

"Now look here, Jack, you just go up to the lane, and keep watch. Your father's down at the wharf. If you see him coming, run down and give word in a minute. Mind, I'll cripple you if you ain't sharp about it."

"You must clear out sharp, gen'lemen, if Jack sings out. I'd not have Marks find you here for something."

They followed her up the ruinous creaking staircase, past two floors. Only one half-open door gave them a momentary glimpse of the squalid misery within, and that was hastily slammed as their presence became known.

The garret was a wretched hole, and its occupant in thorough keeping with it. She was a tall, gaunt, elderly woman, clad in rags, and with a tangled mat of grey hair twisted up at the back of her head. She eyed her visitors with a half-fierce, half-defiant look.

"I should think you have seen nearly enough, have you not?" Harold said, after they had stood a few moments in the room.

The woman started as he spoke, and looked at him with a half-puzzled, inquisitive look.

"Who's that?" she abruptly asked her landlady, pointing to Harold.

"Hush! that's his reverence, the parson. Him as has promised ye the money."

The woman said no more, but she continued to watch Harold. There was something about her which attracted his own attention, and he resolved to question Mrs. Marks about her when they got down-stairs again.

The five shillings were duly paid, and they began their descent, necessarily a cautious one, of the crazy staircase.

Outside the door which had been open as they ascended, was standing a tall bony Irishwoman, with her hands firmly planted against her sides, steadying herself, as best she might, against the doorpost.

Their appearance was the signal for a volley of curses and abuse, the greater part of which their uncertain utterance, and strong brogue, rendered unintelligible to her hearers. It was evident the object of their visit had been suspected, and she had come out to deliver her sentiments on the subject.

"Get on, gen'lemen, and don't notice her," Mrs. Marks whispered. "She's got the drink in her, and like enough she'll be at ye if ye say a word. She's just mad when she's in liquor."

The unfortunate committee manifested unmistakable signs of terror.

"Go on," Harold said. "I'll bring up the rear. I'm better accustomed to this sort of thing than you. I can manage her, even should she close with me."

They got past in safety, however, the virago's wrath appearing not to have reached the point of a personal assault.

She hurled a parting volley after them as they descended the next flight. Then staggering forward to the foot of the flight above her room, she leaned against the rotten balustrade, and looking up, shouted,—

"And as for ye up there as let 'em in, see if I don't break every bone in your blessed skin for ye. D'ye hear, *Sukey Mayne?*"

Harold Seton stopped dead, and staggered against the wall. At the moment little Jack dashed in at the open door, breathless.

"Father's comin', roarin' drunk!" he shouted, and instantly fled again.

"Look sharp, gen'lemen," Mrs. Marks exclaimed.

"One moment," Harold said.

"No, no, sir, for the love of God be quick. There'll be murder if you're caught here."

She spoke in a tone of piteous entreaty, and was evidently trembling in every limb. He was forced to yield, and they hastily left the house. Not a moment too soon. Almost at the entrance to the court Marks passed them, in a state which fully justified his son's description.

Harold Seton could not listen now to feeble platitudes about sanitary measures, and mild suggestions respecting carbolic acid. He heard it all like a man in a dream, and somewhat abruptly telling his companions that he had given them as much time as he could spare, and shown them as much as was necessary to enable them to prepare their report for the next meeting of the council, he led them back as far as some of the more respectable streets, and then left them.

His first impulse was to return instantly to the court, but a moment's reflection changed his intentions. The drunken master of the house, and the Irish virago, were not a pleasant combination to face under any circumstances; and even as it was, he dreaded what the possible results of their visit might be to poor Mrs. Marks. If they were evil, his return would probably only aggravate them. This consideration decided him to wait till the next day before he pursued his investigations; and he returned to the rectory.

How the face of that woman seemed stamped upon his memory now ! She had attracted his attention, without his being conscious why himself, until that name, so long unheard, had pointed his thoughts. Now he saw, or thought he saw, the reason plainly enough. Surely, wretched and degraded as she was, and with every line of her face telling its tale of an evil life, there was a likeness in her to himself, or, to put it more correctly, a likeness in himself to her. He turned from the thought with a shudder, and tried to persuade himself it was but imagination ; that a resemblance to himself was the last thing a man was likely to detect. Still he could not shake off the conviction, and if it were so, whence did that resemblance spring ?

As he thought of the wretched degraded being in whom he had observed it, he felt he could not face that question. In less than four-and-twenty hours, however, it should be answered, one way or the other, and the uncertainty of years ended. But those four-and-twenty hours seemed an age.



"Lor, sir, I can't tell. I expect the boat's one of the coal boats as comes back and for'ard, but then those men don't stick to a boat long, mostly; and like enough, if he was to come again, she wouldn't be with him. I don't expect she's his wife really. It's very few of them women as comes with the sailors that's really married to 'em."

"I suppose you'd know her if you saw her again, would you not?"

"Know her? yes, quite well."

"Then keep a look-out, Mrs. Marks, and make Jack do the same, among the boats that come up the river. I wish very particularly to see that woman; and if you come across her, and will let me know where I may find her, I'll willingly give you five pounds."

"Five pounds, sir?"

"Yes, five pounds."

"You may be sure, sir, I'd keep a close watch for a quarter that sum. If she's to be found, you shall know where she is."

Very weary and dispirited he returned home. That the woman was really the object of their long search so many years ago he had not the least doubt. Her inquiries about him were quite sufficient confirmation of that fact; and he had actually stood in the presence of the only person in the world who could have solved all the doubts of years; and the chance had slipped from his grasp, probably never to return. She seemed not to have gained information enough to make her certain of his identity, or possibly she might have sought him; though if she knew all he supposed, it was strange, reduced to such absolute poverty, she had never tried sooner to turn her knowledge to account. Whence had she come? whither had she gone? would she ever return? He tormented himself in vain with these questions, and worse than all, again and again would rise the torturing

thought, Was not that degraded wreck of womanhood his own mother?

In his own mind all doubts about his parentage were decided. The likeness had condemned him to himself; and he soon passed into a longing for the legal proof which would enable him to cast off, at once and for ever, the burden of a false position. Some months before, such a prospect might have led him on to many other visions. Now he had nothing beyond for which to hope.

There was no prospect, for some weeks at least, of his hearing anything more of the lost clue, and the chances of his doing so at all seemed very slender. Even supposing the woman came back to Middleborough, it was, to say the least, doubtful whether Mrs. Marks and her hopeful son, notwithstanding the stimulus their vigilance had received, would succeed in getting hold of her. Among the crowded lanes and courts adjoining the wharves, a single waif such as she was would be likely enough to pass unnoticed. There was wretched uncertainty over the subject.

The town council met again, and received the report of the committee. Much consternation was expressed at its contents. The committee had certainly made up for past supineness in action by the employment of strong language, as far as such atonement might extend. If the use of strong adjectives could have improved the sanitary condition of Middleborough, more would have been effected in these few days than had been done in double the number of years previously, in the spasmodic attempts at improvement to which they had been driven from time to time. Nor, now that it was too late, were the corporation slow to take up the matter. But even when energetically handled, these things are not done in a moment, especially after long-continued neglect, and the enemy was not far distant. Weeks of invaluable time had been allowed to slip away, while the unhealthiness of the season, and the constantly increasing

price of provisions, had been uttering their silent but ominous warnings in vain. After all, Agnes Battersby had done more in one single sentence to infuse energy into the corporation, than all the efforts of Harold Seton and others had been able to accomplish.

She had succeeded in keeping the mayor up to a comparative state of energy about the new hospital, a scheme which she had never allowed to drop entirely; and she sent for him one day to pay into his hands, as treasurer, some cheques she had received for the building fund. Agnes was terribly anxious about the threatened danger. She had heard ominous words from others beside Harold and Arthur Seton, and trembled as she thought of the peril to which it would expose many who were dear to her. She did not spare the mayor, and he, a little irritated at the perpetual renewal of the subject, with the at least implied censures on the corporation appended, rather made light of it, and treated the danger as exaggerated. Agnes turned upon him with a flash in her eyes.

"Well, Mr. Hallett, you must believe what you choose. But I would commend to your consideration one remark which Dr. Hartley made to me only two days ago."

"What is that, Miss Battersby?"

"He said we might well look to it; for he was certain, with this unhealthy season, that if typhus fever took firm hold of the low districts of the town, it would not stop there. You had better think of that."

The mayor did think of it, and he repeated the prognostication with much effect. Dr. Hartley was a man whose opinion had great weight in Middleborough.

It was too late, however. Perhaps under any circumstances the evil could hardly have been averted.

"How energetic the corporation have become since they heard your threat!" Agnes remarked, with a laugh, to Dr. Hartley one morning.

He smiled rather sadly. "I wish I could have foreseen it would produce so much effect," he answered; "it should have been sounded in their ears much earlier."

"But it may do much good even yet."

"Some, perhaps. But you must remember this is a confidential communication, Miss Battersby; the evil is begun."

"Dr. Hartley, you are not in earnest?"

"Only too sadly so. The infirmary surgeon called me in to consultation only this morning. There is no question it is a decided case of typhus, and some of the symptoms are very bad. He has one or two other doubtful cases as well, and the infirmary will only admit a very few more patients. We wish it kept quiet, however, as long as possible. I am certain there will be a panic the moment it becomes known. To you, in confidence, I will admit that I fully believe a time of terrible trial is before us, and God only knows who besides the poor may be the victims."

"Have you told Mr. Seton?"

"I have."

"How does he take it? He has been so anxious."

"I never saw an announcement produce such an effect. I have been anxious about him all this summer. He has seemed dull, depressed, and altogether very unlike his usual self. I have been convinced either that he was ill, or that some mental anxiety was pressing upon him, and I quite dreaded telling him this. Still I felt he ought to be the first to know—so much rests upon him. I never saw anything so extraordinary as the effect of my communication. It acted like an electric shock. In a moment all his old energy seemed to come back to him, and he really looks quite himself again."

Agnes was soon able to endorse that statement herself. She felt she had hardly been conscious how changed Harold had been of late until she saw him again as he had been of old; and Arthur said the same. Evelyn said nothing; she only looked very grave and thoughtful.

It was quite true; he felt it himself. That first warning that the enemy was actually at the gate had acted upon him like a trumpet-call on an old soldier. The outward pressure was strong enough to deaden for a time his own personal sense of suffering. It temporarily scarred over the wound, and nerved him for his task. The dull, heavy lethargy which had weighed him down so long passed away in a moment, and all his old energy and fire came back as the alarm sounded, and he felt that all eyes were turned upon him as the leader on whom everything would depend.

"We shall have it on us in all its force very soon now," he said to Agnes one morning. "Another case of decided typhus was admitted to the infirmary yesterday, and two more this morning. Oh, if we only had proper hospital accommodation now, how many lives it might save!"

Agnes answered with something almost like a sob.

"Agnes, my dear child, what does that mean?" he asked.

"Oh, it is so hard to be lying useless here when there is such need for every available worker."

"Useless! Agnes, what an idea! Go on finding us money, as you have been doing, and you will do better service than any one else. We must be prepared to spend freely, even lavishly, now. The panic will begin directly. There are only two or three more available beds in the infirmary, and the moment they are filled, and the wretched patients have to be sent back to their own miserable dens, it will transpire what is the matter; and then the dread of infection will tenfold increase the evil."

That came to pass very shortly. In a very few days the infirmary was crowded to the utmost possible limit. Then the truth could be no longer concealed, and a great cry arose in all parts of the town. Every one knows what such panics are. Thank God they are rarer now than in days gone by, and there are never wanting brave and devoted men and women to go calmly forth and stand between the living and the dead; but the panic was very great in Mid-

deleborough. The generally healthy situation of the town had in a measure helped to counteract the evil influences of overcrowding and imperfect drainage ; and though occasionally some epidemic had visited the place, such instances had neither been frequent nor severe. Since that outburst of cholera of which Agnes Battersby had spoken, they had had no severe visitation of the kind.

The fire trieth every man's work. Now it began to be apparent how much Harold Seton had done for Middleborough. When the cholera had come, the upper part of the town had been a desert. Every one who had the means fled, and left the sufferers to their fate. It was very different now. There were many who did the same ; but among those who fled there was hardly one who did not give liberally of his substance for the relief of the sufferers, even if he had not the courage to stay in the tainted air. And there were many who boldly stood and faced the danger rather than increase the panic by flying. And many more still, who even, while admitting they could do but little for want of knowledge, yet fearlessly visited the infected lanes and courts, and sat beside the stricken sufferers, merely to try and mitigate the alarm.

All this was Harold Seton's work. They said so themselves. He had never been a mere dogmatic teacher of the doctrines of Christian faith. He had taught them, both by precept and example, that faith without works is a mere cold and profitless intellectual admission of certain truths ; but until this moment he had never known himself on how many his teaching had taken a firm hold, or how generally it had raised the whole moral and religious tone of the place, affecting even those almost personally beyond his reach. He had stirred the stagnant waters, but had been all unconscious how far the healthy rippings had extended.

He had but little time to notice it. There was need enough for every nerve to be strained. Ordinary humanity,

with the best intentions, requires a leader, and there was none save himself who could fill that post. Week after week passed, and still the pestilence seemed rather on the increase than otherwise, and in many places the doctors were whispering the terrible words "black fever." The sufferers were stupefied, paralyzed with terror, as they always are. It was almost impossible to get them to make the least attempt to save themselves; and even the immediate burial of the dead, where a whole family were crowded into one room, was only to be insured by incessant vigilance, and sometimes by the intervention of the strong arm of the law.

Lady Battersby and her daughter had been among the first to fly, Agnes remarking, with a touch of her old bluntness, that it was the best thing they could do, and the longer they stayed away the better. Lady Battersby had, perhaps as a sort of conscience salve, left Agnes power to draw upon her banker to any extent, which her daughter considered quite made up for unlimited absence on her part; and Nellie as well had placed no inconsiderable sum in her sister's hands.

"I mean Shrublands to be the head-quarters of the financial and nursing department," she said; and she carried out her purpose. She was sole mistress of the house, and there was not a servant in it who would not have worked to the last gasp for Miss Agnes. She had always funds in hand for everything that was needed, and she kept open house as well for all the active workers. There was no hour of the day or night when they would not find the food and stimulant so urgently needed at such a time ready for them in the large dining-room at Shrublands. It was a method of helping which would not, perhaps, have crossed many people's thoughts, but Agnes Battersby was always original; and the overtaxed workers at least knew what good service she had done.

Evelyn Macdonald had quietly appropriated the infirmary

as her share of the work. Arthur had protested. He knew she was in the right, but how could he help protesting against her being exposed to danger? He got nothing for his protest save a look; a strangely mingled one of indignation and astonishment, with just a shade of scorn, and he ventured on no more remonstrances.

"I fear I cannot do very much," she said, "I am too ignorant of the routine of hospital work. But at any rate I can check the panic among the nurses, and see that the doctor's orders are carried out."

So into the infirmary she went, and, like most people distrustful of their own powers, did a great deal more than she was herself aware, and exercised all the influence of a cool, clear head upon the confusion which had hitherto reigned there.

In this way week after week passed, and at last the scourge began to show symptoms of having exhausted its fury. There were fewer fresh cases, and those reported were of a milder form. The people were beginning to recover from their panic, and show something like energy again. But Dr. Hartley's prediction had been fully verified: the fever had not confined itself to the lower parts of the town; and when at last Harold Seton appointed a day for a special service of thanksgiving that the pestilence had virtually passed from among them, there were many vacant places, and an amount of mourning in the church, which told a sad tale. Not one of the active workers had gone, however. Two or three had had the fever, but all had recovered; though there were many who looked as if they could hardly have stood out much longer.

Harold went the round of the infected districts and the infirmary in the afternoon. It was more than a fortnight since a fresh case had been reported, and all the sufferers were doing well; but still he kept watch and ward. As he came out of the infirmary Dr. Hartley joined him.

"All doing well," he said. "Please God, in another

fortnight we shall not have a single case in Middleborough. Now I have a word to say to you about yourself, Seton."

"What is that?"

"I insist upon your going away."

"Do you?"

"Yes, indeed I do. We owe you more than we can ever repay, more than I can describe; and we mean to take care of such a valuable possession."

"I don't catch your meaning, doctor," Harold said.

"I mean this, that you are utterly worn out. The labour you have gone through has been incredible. Excitement has kept you up; but now, before long, great prostration must follow. I will tell you openly what my fear is. The exhaustion of physical strength, consequent upon all you have gone through, is just the very thing to dispose you to take the fever yourself; and I tell you plainly, Seton, if you took it at this moment, there would not be a hope for you. That is why I want you to go away for rest and quiet at once. Don't run the risk of bringing upon us a loss which would throw into the shade all we have as yet gone through."

Harold listened silently, with a half-bitter smile playing about his mouth.

"You will arrange to go away at once, will you not?" Dr. Hartley urged.

"Not for another month. That will see us over Christmas. I will take all due precautions, doctor. One has no right to trifle with one's life; but until I am convinced all danger of any further outbreak is over I will not leave my post."

Dr. Hartley knew it was useless to urge him further; and though he regretted the determination, and really felt anxious about him, he could not but honour the motive which kept him at his post until he felt convinced all need for his remaining there was at an end.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FRESH PATIENT.

It seemed little likely there would be any further need for watchfulness. Now and then there would be an alarm raised of a fresh case of typhus fever, but they were generally false or greatly exaggerated reports. That there should, under any circumstances, be occasional cases of it was perfectly natural. Other places besides Middleborough had suffered, and were still suffering, from the united effects of scarcity and an unhealthy season, and the town had enough of the characteristics of a seaport to render it susceptible of external influences in such cases. More than once some reported fresh case of typhus fever turned out, on examination, to be that of some sailor who had brought it with him, and perhaps been left because too ill to go back with the vessel which had brought him. Still, on the whole, the traces of the epidemic were rapidly dying away, and the town gradually beginning to wear its accustomed aspect.

“Now that one has breathing-time again, Harold,” Arthur said, as they sat together one evening, “is it too much to ask your reverence to spare a little attention to family affairs?”

His tone was slightly constrained. He hardly knew why, yet he felt an instinctive dislike to consult Harold upon his own private affairs. He had of late always answered in such a cold, measured tone, whenever anything connected with them had been under discussion.

"Not at all, lad," Harold replied, in a far easier tone than that in which Arthur had put his question. He had very little idea what was coming.

"Well, then, the fact is, I want to know when you are going away."

"I promised to go as soon as Christmas is over. That is to say, on condition we have no fresh cases of fever."

"There is no danger of that now. There has not been a single stray case for ever so long. But how long are you to be away?"

"About a month, I suppose."

"That will do splendidly. Then, when you come back, you'll give me a month's leave, won't you?"

"Two, if you like. But why go away at such a dreary time?"

Arthur smiled. "I don't think it will seem dreary to me," he answered.

There was something in the tone which made Harold look up, and he suddenly grew cold and constrained. But, for once, Arthur was too entirely pre-occupied to notice it.

"Arthur, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I shall not go alone. I've a deal to tell you, Harold. I should have done so before, but that it was all settled just as the fever broke out, and that seemed no time for discussing such things. Eva and I are to be married early in February."

He paused, Harold made no answer.

"Why don't you congratulate me, old fellow?"

"You have taken me so by surprise," Harold said, rather faintly.

"I had no intention of being mysterious about it. You would have known but for the reason I mentioned. It was my mother's doing. Eva won her heart so completely, the first time she went to Rookwood last summer, that she has entirely talked my father round, and persuaded him to agree

to our being married in February, instead of waiting until the autumn. I wanted to take the first opportunity of talking to you about it, because you see I have a great deal to arrange, and there is not much time to lose. I must settle about a house by Christmas, and think of furnishing—in part, at least.”

“Stop, stop, lad, not so fast,” Harold said, with a gasp, “you fairly bewilder me.”

“But there’s no time to lose.”

“There are ten minutes to spare at least. Let me think. I seem like a man in a dream. I declare, Arthur, in all this terrible time I had almost forgotten you and Evelyn were engaged; and to be married in February, did you say?”

“Yes, early in the month.”

“Hardly two months,” he said, leaning his head on his hand. “Then you certainly haven’t much time to spare. How my head aches to-night! Well, go on.”

“We can talk about it to-morrow.”

“No, no—go on.”

“Well, I want to settle with you about taking a house. There are one or two to be had. I want to know in which direction you would like me to settle.”

“Upon my word, you and Eva must settle that as you choose. I am really not fit to advise you. I am in a state of collapse; and yet—no, I really think you’d better leave that matter until after you come back.”

“Why?”

“This is a bad time to take a house. You could rent one from the March quarter, you know, and then, as I shall very likely go away for a long holiday, you might take possession of the rectory, and furnish at your leisure.”

Arthur was hardly disposed to yield, but Harold urged his point. He scarcely knew what he intended himself; but, at any rate, such a plan would prevent them committing themselves before he had time to decide. Through all the

confusion of his thoughts was running a strong conviction that he could not stand Arthur remaining there with Evelyn as his wife.

"Well, such an arrangement would certainly give us more time," Arthur said.

"Then let it be so."

"But then there is another thing to settle—about the marriage. You must marry us, old fellow."

"Nonsense! It's the place of some relative of the bride's to do that."

He turned away as he spoke on some plausible pretext, conscious himself that he had grown very white.

"Indeed you must, Harold," Arthur exclaimed, earnestly. "Eva would not think herself properly married unless you tied the irrevocable knot."

He was growing very desperate. He knew he must consent. He had no plausible pretext for refusing.

"Very well," he said at last, with a tremendous effort, "if you and Eva wish it, so be it."

"Of course we do. It's to be very quiet. It's to be done in London, Harold."

"In London?"

"Yes. You see it can't be here. There's the name. It would raise such scandal. She can't be married in the name of Macdonald, poor child. She must sign the register as Evelyn Seymour; and in London it would attract no attention."

"Ah, yes, true," Harold answered, absently, "I forgot. Well, you must settle it all definitely before I go away, and then I will take care to be back in time."

He left the room as he spoke. He went up to his own room, and throwing himself down upon the bed tried to think, but it was useless. He was too giddy and confused, and he lay there in a sort of half-stupor until the morning, with only a dim consciousness floating through his brain

that it was not much consequence what was settled. This sort of thing could not last long.

A very few evenings after, a strange-looking messenger arrived at the rectory.

"Some one wants to see you, sir," the servant said. "He won't send in a message."

"Who is it?"

"A ragged-looking lad, sir,—quite a little fellow."

"I'll come."

Harold walked into the hall. There, with the tattered remains of a cap in his hand, stood a regular city Arab, though brushed up as far as circumstances would admit.

"What do you want, my lad?" Harold asked.

"Be you his reverence?"

"Yes."

"Then mother says as how you must come directly. There's a lady in our house took very bad, and mother thinks as how it's the fever."

"Have you sent for a doctor?"

"I'm a-goin' for the parish doctor soon as I've see'd you. But mother says you're to come, 'cause she ain't got no money, and the lady ain't got no money neither."

"What's her name?"

"Dun' know. She ain't been there long."

"Well, you go on for the doctor; I'll go. But stay, where is it?"

The lad named the place,—a low court, close to the water.

"And look here," he said; "if you see any one hanging about along the lane, just sing out you're his reverence, will ye? Ye see I can't go down with ye mysel', because I've to go for the doctor; and some of our fellows mightn't know who it was, and they're a rough lot."

Harold smiled at his youthful adviser, and promised all

confusion of his thoughts was running a search of the
 that he could not stand Arthur remain
 as his wife. There's no need for

"Well, such an arrangement would be a weary night."
 time," Arthur said. "Never he would not let his

"Then let it be so." "For a moment.

"But then there is another myself," he said. "Only if I'm
 marriage. You must make a mission-room lecture for me."

"Nonsense! It's needless. More than once, as he
 bride's to do that."

He turned away through the deserted lanes which led to
 conscious himself, he heard a low whisper issuing

"Indeed you are in the corner,—

"Eva would hold on. It's his reverence."

He asked a voice at the entrance

He reached the wretched court.

The speaker was an imp very similar to the messenger

who had reached the rectory, only so small, Harold had

who had nearly run over him without seeing him.

"Yes."

"Then come along. Mother sent me to watch. She

thought may be you'd not find the house."

He led the way to a wretched hovel at the extreme end

of the court. The sound of their footsteps brought a

woman to the door.

"Here's his reverence, mother," the child cried.

"Who is this who is ill here?" Harold asked.

"Dun' know nought o' her, your reverence. She comed

three days since, wi' a rough-looking chap o' a sailor, as

said she were his wife, and he wanted her to stay a few

days till boat went off again. He paid a fortnight's rent

and went, and he ain't been since; and I expect as how

he knew she'd the fever on her, and wanted to be rid o'

her. She'd been bad ever since next day, but she's awfu'

bad to-day."

ange feeling came over Harold. "You don't know?"

ver heard it."

like to see her."

o. She's up-stairs. But there ain't no light.

o money, and there ain't a bit o' coal or
ything."

o me up a light, then. I'll pay for everything she

The woman produced a candle, and they went up-stairs. The room was nearly as bare of furniture as the landlady had declared it to be of everything else. On a heap of rags in a corner was lying what seemed little more than another bundle of rags. As the light came in, the woman moved, however, and turned her face towards it. Harold shivered from head to foot. It was the woman he had heard addressed by the Irish virago as "Sukey Mayne."

"Water," she faintly murmured.

"Get her some water," Harold said.

"Lor' bless your reverence, she don't want it. She don't know what she says. She's quite queer in her head."

"Go and get it directly," Harold said, sternly.

The woman obeyed. Harold took the cup himself, and held it to the sufferer's parched lips. She drank deeply.

"How long have you left her lying here in this state," Harold asked, "without even a drop of water within her reach?"

"She was moving about this morning, your reverence, and I'm sure I couldn't help it. It wasn't no use to say anything to her. She were quite queer. She's been talking like a mad thing, and saying as how she were related to your reverence, only you didn't know it. She'd begin now if she heard your name."

"Tell her who I am."

The landlady went up to the bedside, and putting her hand on the sick woman's shoulder, said,—

“My dear, listen a bit. Here's his reverence come to see ye; the parson, don't you hear?—Mr. Seton. Turn and speak to him.”

“Seton, Seton! What, Harold Seton? Ha! ha! Well, ain't it right people should look to their own kith and kin? Tell him I want a drop o' gin.”

“There, your reverence, I tell'd ye so; she's quite queer.”

“She's very ill,” Harold said, in a low tone. “We must wait for the doctor. I'll walk out and look for him.”

He walked out into the court, and leaning against the wall shook with heavy sobs from head to foot. It was too horrible. There could be no doubt she was his mother, and every nerve seemed to quiver at the thought.

The sound of approaching footsteps roused him, and mastering himself with an effort he advanced to meet the doctor.

“I am afraid it is a bad case,” he said. “She seems to me very ill.”

The doctor went up and looked at the patient.

“It is an undoubted case of typhus, and a severe one,” he said as he came down. “Only I trust, from what the landlady says, she brought it with her.”

“What is to be done?”

“Why, there is nothing can be done in that horrible hole, save to make her as comfortable as circumstances will allow for the night. I dare say, by promising to pay her, we can get the landlady to give some little attention to her. To-morrow I will have her moved to the infirmary.”

“Not to the infirmary,” said Harold, suddenly.

The doctor looked at him in surprise. “Why, you would not have her remain here, surely?”

“Certainly not. But I don't want her taken to the infirmary. It will raise a fresh alarm. Nor need you put

her on your list, doctor. I choose to take this case entirely on my own hands. My own medical attendant will undertake it for me, and I will see that proper lodgings and good nursing are provided for her at my own expense."

The doctor could only acquiesce, in silent astonishment at the rector's eccentric conduct. He prescribed for the patient and departed.

Harold's oratory was eminently successful with the landlady. When she found it worth her while to remember it, she discovered that she had a small bed, and one or two other pieces of furniture she could let the sick woman have for the night. A hope was beginning to rise in her mind, that if she made her comfortable Harold would leave her there, and she might make a profitable thing of it. He saw through the sudden activity she displayed, and left her to her delusion. His sole and all-absorbing object now was to secure the wretched creature lying before him every possible comfort. He could neither have her removed nor remain there the whole night himself, and as long as her landlady was left undisturbed in her fallacious hope he knew the sufferer would be secure of every attention she could pay her. Before he left, the miserable room where she was lying had actually assumed an appearance of positive comfort compared with what it had worn when he first entered. He lingered long, but at last he went, followed by the landlady's parting assurance that "she'd tend her as if she was her own mother," which assurance rather quickened Harold's retreating steps.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST DROP IN A FULL CUP.

EVEN Arthur Seton began to think his cousin's proceedings had a tinge of eccentricity about them, when he heard the next morning what his intentions were,—the class of lodgings, the style of nursing, and the medical attendance with which he chose this fresh case should be provided at his own expense.

“Why, what on earth can make the woman such an object of interest to you, Harold? She'll cost you a fortune. You'll have to pay enormously for lodgings for a case of typhus.”

“I know that. I don't care if I pay twenty guineas a week.”

Arthur only shrugged his shoulders. “Well, I dare say you won't find much difficulty then.”

“I suppose you think I am out of my mind,” Harold said, with a faint smile. “I'm not that, Arthur, nor am I acting in this business as I do without a reason. You will probably know before very long why I have thus acted, and then you will not wonder,—at least, not at this; but I do wonder how you'll feel, lad. There is one more thing, though. I wish you to say nothing at all about this in any letters you or Eva may write to Rookwood. You'll know why I ask that as well before long. In the meantime respect my wishes in ignorance as to their cause.”

It was a wise request. It seemed likely enough, so severe was the attack of fever, that the patient might even yet

escape from his hands without his gaining any positive information from her, and in that case it would be better his cousin should never know he had come across her.

"Mrs. Mayne is a trifle better this morning, your reverence," the landlady said, meeting him at the door.

"How did you find out her name?"

"Oh, why, you see, finding your reverence took interest in her, I sat up myself, and she was a deal better for a bit after she'd had her medicine, and quite rational like; and I asked her what her name was, and she said it was Mayne; and that it was her husband as had come with her, and that she believed he'd deserted her because he knew she'd the fever on her. Then she got quite queer again, and did go on awful. It quite made me creep and crawl to hear her; but any way I'm sure she is better this morning."

It was anything but the case. The woman was evidently worse.

"Don't you think she looks better, your reverence?"

"Certainly not. She is worse. She must be moved without delay."

The landlady's ardour suddenly cooled at this announcement, but that was of no consequence now. Harold had, at enormous expense, secured lodgings such as he considered fitting to the sufferer, and thither she was moved in a few hours.

They were terrible days which followed to him. For more than a week she hung hovering between life and death.

"Do you think there is any chance she will recover?" Harold asked Dr. Hartley.

He shook his head. "It is a very difficult question to answer. She has naturally a very strong constitution; but then the life she has led is terribly against her. She has evidently been a hard drinker."

"Supposing she does not recover, do you think there is

any hope she will regain her senses at all before her death? You will think it a strange subject for me to be so deeply interested in, but the fact is, I have every reason to believe that woman is in possession of information it is of importance to me to obtain. That is the reason of my anxiety on the subject."

"I cannot answer that question either. I confess my own impression is that she will not recover. In that case she may, perhaps, become quite sensible before death, or she may not be sufficiently so to enable you to depend on what she says. It is impossible to arrive at any opinion."

Day after day Harold watched and waited, alternating between a feverish hope and torturing dread, according as the patient seemed at one moment better, at another worse. At times there were lucid intervals in the midst of her delirium, when she seemed almost rational; but only almost, and he felt that even had he dared to run the risk of exciting her by any questions, he could have placed no reliance on her answers. He had strictly forbidden that his name should be mentioned in her presence, and though sometimes in her ravings she seemed to him to have wandered back to the days of her girlhood, she never breathed a word on the subject on which all his thoughts were fixed. More often her bewildered brain seemed occupied with dark scenes of her later life.

"I think this must be about the twenty-first day," Dr. Hartley said, as he stood one day beside the bed. "She will probably take a turn to-night."

"She has only been here a fortnight," Harold replied.

"Yes, but she had evidently had the fever upon her for some time before. Poor thing, I believe she might have been saved if it had been taken in time."

The words were the most decisive, as to his opinion, which he had yet uttered.

"You want to get some information from her, do you

not?" he asked, after a moment's pause, during which he had been watching Harold with a look of grave anxiety.

"I do."

"Then I think you must not leave her for a moment. I grieve to give you such advice, for you are in no state to be here yourself, but there will be no time to lose. When the fever has fairly turned I expect to see her sink rapidly."

"Will she be rational?"

"More or less. I cannot say exactly whether she will be sufficiently so for you to depend upon what she may say. I cannot decide. You must judge that point for yourself."

Dr. Hartley left, and Harold sat down for his silent watch beside the bed. He felt very calm and quiet; calm enough even to contemplate the sufferer as she lay tossing from side to side, and say to himself that she was his mother; and to speculate upon whether, after all, he might not fare exactly as his reputed father had done so many years before, and gain nothing from the dying woman which would afford proof sufficient to enable him to act. But it was a terrible calmness, and certain sooner or later to be dearly paid for; arising, as it did, solely from the intense excitement which had strung up every nerve to the pitch of absolute and perfect steadiness. He knew the time was come. Within the next twenty-four hours the question must be for ever decided, in this world, whether he should be able to produce legal proof of that of which he had now not the slightest doubt; or whether he must continue, before the world at least, to hold a false position. Patiently and quietly he kept his watch, and his hand, as he held a cup for the nurse for a moment, was as steady as a rock.

Towards midnight the sufferer began to grow quieter, and after a while she sank into a troubled sleep. By

degrees this became more calm and heavy, and her breathing more regular.

"She's taken the turn now, sir," the nurse whispered, "and I expect she'll sink very fast. She'll be quite herself, most likely, when she wakes; so perhaps you'll find out if she's any friends should be written to."

Harold made a silent sign of assent, and the heavy hours rolled on in unbroken silence. At last the patient moved and opened her eyes. She was rational enough, there was no doubt of that; and Harold, with a feeling as if the muscles were tightening over his chest and suffocating him, drew back as the nurse bent over her patient, and held to her lips the nourishment which the doctor had ordered should be administered every few moments.

"You feel better now, don't you, my dear?" she said.

The answer came in a low but distinct tone,—

"No. I'm dying."

Harold came forward. "Leave her with me," he said, "I will give her the nourishment."

The nurse hesitated a moment, and then left the room.

Harold sat down beside the bed. "Susan Mayne," he said, quietly, "I sought you vainly over half Europe many years ago. I little thought ever to find you now."

She looked at him with a puzzled look. "Who are you?" she asked. "I ought to know, but my head feels a little confused still."

"That is a question you must answer. The world calls me Harold Seton."

"Ah, yes, I remember. I thought I knew the face when you came to my place with those gentlemen. I never thought to see you again before I died. There's a look of your father about you. I'm glad I've seen you once more, before my wretched life came to an end."

"You believe yourself a dying woman?"

"I know I am."

"Then, knowing that, will you answer me truly one or two questions?"

"As many as you like. Though I don't know what questions you can have to ask me."

Harold paused for a moment. Then in a low tone he asked,—

"Are you, or are you not, my mother?"

She would have started straight up in bed if he had not held her down.

"Your mother!" she gasped. "No, a thousand times—you surely must know—and yet—you could never have asked even me that question if you did."

"Know what?"

"Who I am. You could never have dreamed I was your mother if you had known that."

"I have not the least idea who you are, beyond your being the niece of Mayne, the butler at Rookwood."

"I am nothing of the kind. That was all a got-up story. Harold Seton, I am your half-sister, your father's daughter."

"Who was my father?"

"Who was your father? What do you mean? You know well enough you are the son of Sir Myles and Lady Seton."

"I knew nothing of the kind."

She looked at him with a strange, half-bewildered look. Then a sudden light seemed to break across it. "You thought I was your mother," she murmured. "Is it possible, Harold Seton?" and she drew herself closer to him. "Tell me quickly what you mean, and why you asked that question. I'm very weak, and haven't many hours to live. Speak plainly and clearly. Can it be a suspicion got out?"

Briefly, and as rapidly as he could, Harold gave her a sketch of all the circumstances of the case; telling her of

his own discovery of the papers, of their contents, the subsequent long search for herself, and of the line of conduct he had followed in consequence of the failure to obtain any certain information.

She listened with intense breathless earnestness, and as he finished she clasped her hands together with a heavy sob.

“O God ! to think of all the misery your father’s villany has caused,—your father and mine.”

“Can you explain all this?”

“Oh yes, if I have only strength. Give me something—brandy, anything to keep me up, and I’ll tell you all I’d tell you truly now, whatever it might be, with death staring me in the face. But I’ve nothing to hide.”

She took the nourishment he gave. Then, evidently gathering all her strength for the effort, she began,—

“I must tell you the whole story. I never thought it would have been of any consequence. I never thought mother would have done that. This was the way of it. Mrs. Mayne was my mother. She was an Italian, and she was a lady too. She was a nun in a convent at Naples. Sir Myles was there when he was young. He was a wild one, and one day, for a lark, he scaled the convent wall and got into the gardens. My mother was in the garden then ; she hated a convent life, and she let him stay and talk to her. That was the way it began, and he very soon came back ; and after a while he persuaded her to elope with him, telling her if she’d turn Protestant they’d be married in London, and it would be all right. He deceived her with a mock marriage, and kept her in London for a while. But he soon got tired of her ; she was a wilful creature, and had such a temper. At last, one day, in a quarrel, he let out she wasn’t his wife. That seemed to turn her to stone, and all her love for him into hate. Then Sir Myles’s father got scent of it, and there was a dreadful row. She’d just begun to suspect she would be a mother before very

long, and old Mr. Seton—he'd been a bad one in his day—was dreadfully put out about it. He took such a fright she'd try the legality of the marriage ; and though he knew it was safe enough, he didn't like the story coming out, it was such a disgraceful one. At last, he and Sir Myles—he was Captain Seton then—hit upon a scheme. They went to her and proposed to her to marry Mayne. They made her believe he was higher than a servant, and they promised they'd provide for her if she would, and threatened to cast her adrift if she didn't. She wouldn't give in for a time, but at last she did. What could she do?—without a friend, in a foreign country, and not daring to go back to her own because she was a perjured nun. I believe Mayne had a thousand pounds to do it, but I'm not sure about that. I was her child, and was born some time after. It was all kept quite quiet, and I was sent out to nurse ; and then mother told Sir Myles I was dead, and she never let me come near Rookwood until I was four years old. Then she said I was an orphan niece of Mayne's. She had determined, from the day Sir Myles cast her off, she'd be revenged through me in some way, and she wanted him to believe I was dead. I don't believe Sir Myles ever had a suspicion I was his own child ; I never knew it myself for years after. I went to live in Paris when I was eighteen, but I was never married. I ran away with a French officer, and lived with him. He was very kind to me, and I was very happy. I'd never been taught right from wrong, and never cared that I wasn't married. Mother was mad about it when she first heard it, and vowed she'd never hear my name again ; but at last, when I found there was a baby coming, I wrote and told her so, and asked her if she wouldn't come and see me. I was in sad trouble, for my child's father was going. His regiment was ordered for foreign service, and I couldn't go with him. Then mother turned round all of a sudden, and was quite kind, and said she'd take me to

England with her, and get it all over quietly. I thought then something was on her mind, but she didn't say anything. I went with her, and then I found she'd settled all about a place for me to go to, and everything, before she came over to me in France, and I wondered what it all meant. She'd got a quiet place for me, not very far from her, but quite out of the way, and she would never let me go near Rookwood.

"She told me then that Sir Myles was married, and that Lady Seton was to be confined about the same time as I should be, but she didn't say a word more; only there was a look in her eyes I knew boded mischief whenever she spoke of it. She seemed very anxious about it all, and told me I was to be sure and send for her the moment I was ill. She never told me she was to have charge of you, but I suspect Sir Myles had settled that with her before you were born. You were born about a week before my child, and then mother was in a great state, always repeating she hoped my child would be a boy. I couldn't think why she should care. When at last I sent for her she couldn't come directly, because Sir Myles was coming to see her about some arrangements for you, and she didn't arrive until some time after the child was born. She came in in such a state, I couldn't think what ailed her.

"'Is it a boy?' she asked the woman who had been with me.

"'Yes, ma'am,' I heard the woman say, 'fine, healthy little boy, but he's got a club-foot.'

"Mother took on awfully about that, and wanted to take the baby at once to the doctor, but I wouldn't let her. I could be determined too when I liked, and we'd quite a quarrel over it.

"Well, it was soon after that she told me what was in her mind. First she told me all her history. How Sir Myles had deceived her years ago, and that I was his child,

and ought to have had all his property, and taken my place among the highest in the land. Then, when she had worked me up well against him, she proposed to change the children, as a revenge on him, and to bring my child, his grandchild, in for all the property. I wouldn't consent, and mother was nearly mad. I said the club-foot would betray us, but she said she would manage that, and persuade Sir Myles you had had some accident. But I wouldn't yield. I wasn't quite hardened then, and I wouldn't part with my child, for his father's sake. Mother went on so, I got quite frightened. I thought she was going out of her mind, and some mischief would come of it, and then we should all get into trouble. So one day, without saying a word to her, I packed up my things and went back to France. I was sure I should never see my child's father again. He was very fond of me, but I knew how it would be when he was in a foreign country. However, I did try to live respectably and keep my child, but I hadn't a chance. I needn't tell you what my life since has been, always sinking lower and lower. Mother didn't give up about the children then. She wrote to me ever so many times, but I never would do it; and at last she wrote and abused me, and said it was too late now. Sir Myles and Lady Seton had been back for a little, and he'd let her have you at Rookwood for a few days; and mother said she was sure she'd know her own child among a thousand. Besides, my child had eyes as black as night, and it wouldn't do to try it now; but she said in that letter she'd be revenged yet. I never heard from her again, and my boy died soon after she did. It was just out of revenge she sent for Sir Myles, I know, hoping to persuade him the children had been changed when she thought he'd no chance of finding out the truth. And all the trouble has been on your innocent head instead of on him. That's the whole story."

Her tale had been told with many pauses and with much

difficulty. It was evident she was sinking very fast, but it was all perfectly clear and distinct. There was but one thing wanting—positive proof, beyond the word of a dying woman, that it was true. Harold sat silent.

“Don’t you believe me?” she asked.

“Entirely. But how am I to prove to the world the truth of your story?”

She thought for a moment.

“Ah, that is true. Wait, I have it. You know mother’s writing?”

“Perfectly.”

He had found among his father’s papers several letters from Mrs. Mayne, written during the time he was under her care, and had often read them, and was well acquainted with her peculiar hand.

“Then give me that bag.”

It was a small old worn leather bag, her only piece of luggage.

“I kept all her letters about the children; I didn’t know why I did, but I’ve never parted with them. There they are;” and she handed him a packet yellow with age. “You can keep them, and you’ll see she speaks about my child having a club-foot. You know you never had one. Then there’s another thing. The woman’s still alive who nursed me when my child was born. She didn’t know anything. Mother told her I was a French lady where her niece had been living, and had got into trouble; and she called me Madame Laporte. Mother and I always talked French to deceive her, and she never knew. You’ll find her name, and the village where she lives, in one of mother’s letters. She told it me because I wanted to send her a present, so as to make her think it was really all as mother said. I know she’s alive. I met a woman from there last year, who told me. She’d say directly the French lady’s child had a club-foot.”

Her voice failed almost with the last words. She had made a tremendous effort to gather all her strength to tell her tale, and now it was done a deadly faintness came over her.

Harold hastily summoned the nurse ; but they could do very little. They could hardly get any nourishment past her lips. Harold stayed with her ; he could not bear to leave her to die alone with strangers. She was his father's child, whatever her sins might be.

She died in the evening, and then, after commissioning the nurse to give his orders about her funeral, Harold Seton left the house.



CHAPTER XXX.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH.

It was over now—all was over now. As he came out into the quiet street, where not a sound was stirring, he reeled against the wall, unable to steady himself enough to walk. Amidst the wild confusion which was seething in his brain, two facts seemed to stand out in torturing distinctness :— he was the lawfully born son of Sir Myles and Lady Seton ; and Evelyn Macdonald was to be Arthur Seton's wife within a few weeks.

How long he stood leaning there he did not know, but suddenly a cold chill seemed to pass over him, and he shivered violently for a few moments ; then to the chill succeeded a burning heat. Dr. Hartley's words about his own chances if he took the fever flashed across his mind ; and gathering himself up with a strange smile, he strode firmly home.

He sat down in the library, and carefully examined the packet of papers Susan Mayne had given him ; read each letter, compared the writing with that of the letters written by Mrs. Mayne which he had in his possession ; then laid them aside, and sat for nearly an hour in deep thought. Then he turned to his writing-table and settled himself to write. With calm, business-like precision letter after letter was written, sealed, and directed. The last was very long ; it could hardly be called a letter. Sheet after sheet he wrote, numbered, and threw aside. At last that too was finished, and gathering all the sheets together, he sat down,

carefully read them over, and folding them into a large packet, placed within it the letters he had received from Susan Mayne, and sealing it up, addressed it to Ralph Seton.

The dawn was breaking as he did so, and he looked out of the window for a moment. Then once again he took the keys and slowly crossed the churchyard; and in the cold dim light of the grey winter morning he took his farewell of the old church, every stone of which was so dear to him, associated as it was with so many struggles, so many fierce wrestlings of flesh and spirit, so many hard-won victories of which the world knew nothing.

He told Arthur after breakfast that he was going away that very evening.

“Harold, are you ill?”

“Not at the moment, but I feel I have rather overstrained my powers. I must go at once, or it may be too late.”

Each understood that sentence in a different light.

“You will come back in time to fulfil your promise, then?”

No, a thousand times no. He did not utter the words, but they were in his heart. He could not do it. Earthly feelings were fast losing their hold; but still he felt now that he could not pronounce the words which should bind Arthur and Eva together till death should part them.

He did not answer for a moment. Then, seeing Arthur was anxiously waiting for a reply, he said,—

“Arthur, my dear boy, I can make no promises for the future; don't ask me. You will hear before very long much that will make many things in my conduct, which must have surprised you, intelligible. Be content now to know that I feel I have overtaken my strength, and am going away to rest.”

Arthur asked no more questions, but he looked very grave and anxious.

Harold Seton had bidden farewell to his church. There were but two more farewells he must say before night; but he had many things to do that day, and he put them both off until late in the afternoon. Then he went to Shrublands, and sitting down by Agnes' couch, he told her he was going admitting to her that he believed it was already too late, and warning her what the end must be if the fever seized him.

Agnes tried to listen calmly as he talked to her, telling her how much her silent influence had already done for Middleborough, and how much he relied upon it for the future.

"My work is coming to an end in a shorter time than I anticipated," he said. "I cannot leave it quite as I had hoped to do, but it will be better now it should pass to other hands."

"But where are you going?" she asked, in trembling tones.

"Far away, dear child. If I am to die I would fain die far from here. I have always had a longing to end my life far away, where I first worked out its great problem. Besides, I dare not stay here."

She did not ask him why. She felt intuitively that she was in the presence of some great mystery. But her hardly maintained composure gave way entirely when he tried to say good-bye.

He gently soothed her with that mixture of tenderness and authority which had always been so powerful with her, and left her at last either calmed or stunned, he hardly knew which.

It had been hard to say good-bye to her—the one of all his flock who would most sorely feel his loss; but there was a harder task yet to come. He must see Evelyn once more. Evelyn, who, had he but made this discovery a few years sooner, might, perhaps before now, have been his wife.

The thought seemed to have wonderfully little effect upon him.

Mrs. Thornton only expressed her delight that he had made up his mind to go at once. She and Major Thornton had been quite anxious about him for some time. He was certainly looking horribly ill, and she had been urging Major Thornton to remonstrate with him.

"You see, you are tied to be back by a certain date," she said, "so you cannot have a very long holiday."

"Where is Eva?" he abruptly asked.

"She is writing in the breakfast-room. I will ring, and make them tell her you are here."

"No, please don't. I will go and speak to her there. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Thornton. Thanks many for all the kindness you and Major Thornton have ever shown me since the first day I entered your house."

"Good heavens! Mr. Seton, don't speak that way. One would think you were going away for ever."

"All I have seen lately makes life seem very uncertain."

"Oh, but you must not speak so. You are worn out and depressed. You will come back in a month or two quite yourself."

Evelyn rose from her writing as he entered, and looked anxiously at him. Arthur had been there, and told her the fears excited in his own mind.

"Oh, Mr. Seton, I am so sorry," she said.

She had never dropped the habit of calling him Mr. Seton, and he had been rather glad of it. But now, as he took her hand, he said,—

"Call me Harold, Eva. You have never acknowledged me as your cousin, I believe. But why are you sorry?"

"Arthur says he is sure you are ill, and he is so unhappy about you; and oh, Harold, he says he does not believe you really intend to come back in time for our marriage. That is not true, surely."

"Dear Eva," he said, "I will tell you plainly the truth, as I have told it to none. I shall be in my grave before you are Arthur's wife. I feel it."

Evelyn did not shed tears; they were not much in her line; but she grew very white. She knew the doctor's opinion as to the result if he took the fever.

"Harold, do you mean the fever is on you?"

"I do."

"Then do not go. Stay here, dear Harold; do stay, and let me nurse you. I have had practice enough. If it is too late to ward it off, why go away from all who love you?"

She clasped her hands round his arm as she spoke, with an earnest, pleading look he could not face. He almost threw off her touch as he answered—turning resolutely away from her pleading eyes,—

"Not from all who love me. And remember, I may be wrong. My feelings may be but the result of intense depression, though I do not believe they are. But, at any rate, I must go. Do not fear for me. If I am right as to what is before me, not even by you could I be more lovingly tended than I shall be; and indeed, dear Eva, I dare not stay."

"Dare not?"

"Yes, dare not. It is true indeed, although you cannot understand. And now listen for a few moments. There are many things I would have liked to say to you, but I have hardly time. You and Arthur will find yourselves soon in a different position from that for which you are preparing. You are not going to be a poor curate's wife, child. Be a good wife to Arthur. Not only a loving, but a wise one. Eva, you do not know—few women ever do know, save, alas! those whose knowledge is fatal to every man who comes under its influence—the tremendous power of a woman over a man who loves her as Arthur loves you. Use that power well and wisely, and he will be a good and a useful man.

I leave him in your charge. Such keeping is just what he wants. I have trained him for his work, but it needs a woman's influence to keep a man up to the highest point. That must be your work, dear Eva."

"You can hardly say it needs that, Harold."

"Yes, I can. I owe all I am to—my mother."

His voice seemed to linger lovingly on the word, and he paused. Evelyn did not speak. Something about him seemed to awe her into silence.

A few more words of earnest counsel, a few directions, and then he had done.

There was a moment's silence. She was standing before him, quite calm and collected, though with downcast eyes, and a troubled look upon her face. He looked down at her. It was his last look; and almost unconsciously he murmured,—

"Good-bye for ever, Eva."

The tone was low and unsteady. A sudden rush of colour came over her face, and she looked up with a wild, half-terrified questioning look. Their eyes met—Evelyn clasped her hands convulsively, and trembled from head to foot. There was no need for words—she knew it all.

"Oh, Harold!" she gasped, with a half-choked sob.

"Hush, hush, darling!" he said, gently taking one cold hand in his own. "That was a moment's weakness, but it is over. I never meant you should know it, but I am not so strong as I was. The pain has been very terrible, but it is all over, Eva. You know now why I have seemed cold towards you. Very soon you will know even more. Indeed, I do not suffer, dear child. All earthly feelings are fast losing their hold. It is better so. Arthur is worthy of you, and from my heart I say, may the blessing of God rest upon your union. His dealings have seemed a great mystery to me, but all will soon be clear. Good-bye, dear Eva, and remember I do rejoice that you are to be Arthur's wife.

Those eyes of yours have surprised my secret from me in a moment's weakness. You know now why I dare not stay and risk the ravings of delirium here; and you will not mourn that my lonely life is drawing to a close. It was always a trying one to me, but since——No," and he shuddered, "I will not think of it now the pain is past. You will not betray me, Eva. Never let even Arthur know; it would grieve him sorely, poor boy. He will think soon he knows why I never married, and he will think rightly. But only you in all the world will know the whole truth."

She still stood pale and silent, but her eyes spoke eloquently enough,—the only language fitting for a pure, true woman under such circumstances. Words are far too clumsy for such a moment. Harold stood looking at her. Could he dare just once to fold her in his arms? Yes, he could do it. But a few hours before he had not dared. But now, when everything of earth seemed fading so fast, he could hold even her in a close embrace, and knew not a single pulse would quicken.

Very gentle he drew her to him. "God bless you, Eva, for that look. Its memory will smooth my dying pillow. Think of me sometimes, and bless God that my last and sharpest trial has been comparatively so short a one."

He pressed one lingering kiss upon her forehead, and then turned and went his way. She stood for some time where he had left her. Who shall dare to say what thoughts passed through her mind then? Such moments belong entirely to those depths of the human heart never laid bare to mortal eye. After a while she crept up to her room, and there her tears fell fast over the only secret she would ever guard with jealous care from even her husband's knowledge.

Harold Seton left Middleborough that very night, and day and night he travelled, urged on by a feverish dread that his strength might fail before he reached his destina-

tion. Probably that dread kept him up till his goal was won ; for almost as he passed the threshold of the convent he fainted at the feet of the monk who had answered his summons.

To tend the sick and suffering was the almost daily task of the brotherhood, and they had a number of dormitories especially fitted up for the reception of patients whom they considered it necessary to remove from their own houses, so there was no confusion. In a few moments Harold was laid in his bed, and such remedies applied as they deemed fit.

"Alas, brother!" the prior said to Padre Felipe, as they stood together beside the bed, "what a wreck!"

"A wreck of the earthly frame, father, but the spirit has triumphed gloriously. Praised be God that it has done so, even to the slaying of the flesh."

"Will he recover?" The prior had a profound respect for Padre Felipe's medical knowledge.

The monk's pale face kindled. "He has come here to die, father. It was here his warfare as a good soldier of the cross began. Here the cross will be exchanged for the martyr's crown."

The prior hardly approved such words as applied to a heretic ; but he was not prone to administer pastoral rebukes to Padre Felipe, so he made no answer.

For many days Harold Seton lay tossing in wild delirium. A terrible insight his ravings would have given into the fierce conflicts and desperate struggles with sore temptations, of the life which had appeared outwardly so calm and unruffled ; and of the cruel martyrdom of his hapless love, and all too late discovery, had there been any there to understand him. As it was, the acute suffering of his tone betrayed much to Padre Felipe's practised ear, though the words were spoken in an unknown tongue ; and he could only pray, night and day, that he might see reason restored before he died.

Sometimes the old monk would try to soothe and turn the current of his troubled thoughts by a few words in Spanish ; and more than once the sounds seemed to catch his ear ; and he answered back by murmuring, in the same tongue, some of the warnings Padre Felipe had given him so long ago.

Day and night the monk watched over him, with all a woman's tenderness ; and his prayers were granted. The fever left him at last, as it had left his own patient ; quite conscious, and, like her, sinking ;—only sinking more slowly, because a pure and temperate life had left a naturally strong constitution more power to grapple with disease.

Then Padre Felipe heard it all. He could speak so calmly of it all now. Standing on the very verge of eternity, all the struggles and passions and trials of time seemed shrunk into an insignificance as complete as that of the worn-out frame from which they had wrenched the life.

"It has all been well, father," he said. "The path seemed very dark sometimes while I was treading it ; but as I look back the light shines strong upon it."

"Have all rebellious feelings perished, my son ?" He knew what the answer would be, but he loved to hear him say it. It was such a splendid triumph of the faith, that such a nature as that before him should have fought and won such a conflict.

"Yes, all, father. God forgive me that I should ever have murmured at the call to drink my Master's cup and share His baptism ; but He knows how weak the flesh is. Yes, father, it is all clear and bright. Earth has no power. Had I but the physical strength, I could now, without a pang, myself speak the words which shall bind her I loved so well to Arthur for life."

"Have you no commands to leave ?"



See page 311.

"None, father. All my worldly affairs were settled before I left the world, that nothing might disturb the peace of my dying hours."

Nothing did disturb it. He sank very slowly for a time, but then a sudden change came ; and one morning, when the prior softly entered, very early, Padre Felipe held up his hands with a warning look. Harold was lying with his eyes closed, and the stamp of death on his face.

The prior crept noiselessly from the cell, but the instincts of his faith were strong upon him, and very soon he returned, carrying a carved ivory crucifix, which he silently placed on a bracket intended for that purpose, opposite the dying man. A troubled look came over Padre Felipe's face, and he rose and laid his hand upon it.

"Nay, father," he said, in a low tone, "disturb not the peace of a dying man. God has infinite mercy even for those in error."

The sound of his voice roused Harold. He opened his eyes, and a faint smile crossed his face.

"Let it stay, father," he said, in a low though quite audible tone. "Creeds are nothing now. Let my dying eyes rest last on earth upon Him in His humiliation, ere they open for ever upon His glorious presence."

The last words almost died upon his lips, and he never spoke again. He lay with his eyes fixed upon the crucifix, and once or twice his lips moved, but no sound was audible ; and at last they saw that he was dead. But they could not tell the moment when the spirit passed. He had sunk to rest like a tired child to sleep.



CHAPTER XXXI.

WAS IT WORTH THE COST?

RALPH SETON arrived at the monastery within a few days. By Harold's own desire Padre Felipe had written before his death, and told his cousin he was sinking rapidly. He had not troubled himself to give directions about the body from which he had escaped so gladly, so it had been placed—not without some misgiving on the part of the prior—in the vaults beneath the chapel, to await Ralph Seton's orders.

Ralph's decision was instant. The body of "the noblest of the Setons" must sleep with his ancestors, and he took it back with him to England, and gratified his own feelings by laying it with a splendid funeral in the family vaults at Rookwood.

Harold had made no legal will, but the long sheets he had written to his cousin the night before he left England contained memoranda of all he wished, and he knew every word would be binding upon Ralph. Arthur and Eva were to have the fortune he had inherited from his mother. The rest merely referred to various small legacies.

Every wish was faithfully fulfilled, and, in truth, Ralph Seton was lord of the manor with a heavy heart for many a long day.

And in Middleborough? Now that he was gone, what he had done became fully apparent. The whole town mourned him like one man; and the day of his funeral there was not a house to be seen with unclosed shutters.

They placed a splendid memorial window to him in the church. But that was not enough, and a crowded meeting was held to consider how they could best do honour to his memory. There were few who spoke that day with quite steady voices. At last the mayor said he had a proposal to make, suggested to him by one who, he believed, knew better perhaps than any one else in Middleborough what Mr. Seton would have wished. Let his monument be the hospital, for the erection of which he had been so anxious. Could there be a more fitting monument to the memory of the man who had perished from the very pestilence, the horrors of which his unremitting efforts had done so much to mitigate?

There was not one dissentient voice, and in less than a week funds more than sufficient were raised to build the memorial hospital. It is needless to say that suggestion had come from Agnes Battersby.

"Perhaps," she said, bitterly, to Evelyn, when she heard how money was pouring in on every side, "if they had been as energetic while they had him, they might not now be mourning his loss."

Evelyn was silent. She knew all, and she could not echo the words. She was the only one in the whole world who did know all; and what she thought, or what she felt, was hidden deep in her own heart. But she rarely spoke of Harold even to Arthur; and if she did, it was always with the voice and manner which we almost involuntarily reserve for things very solemn and sacred.

But, after all, his noblest and most fitting monuments were not the rich-hued window, nor the splendid hospital which rose in Middleborough ere long. The best tributes to his worth were the living monuments he had left,—the men he had trained and sent forth to do the Church's work, with an ardent desire in their hearts to emulate the zeal, the wisdom, the large-hearted Christianity, the earnest self-

devotion of the man they so deeply revered ; and the numbers of others, men and women too, whom he had taught, not only by precept, but by example, to cast away all indolence and selfishness, and to live for the glory of God and the good of their fellow-creatures ; and who were striving faithfully to live by the light of that teaching, which was all the dearer now, and perhaps all the more powerful, because the voice was silent to their ears, and the example gone for ever from their eyes in this world.

Were such results worth the path of fire by which he had attained to the power of producing them ? Let each one answer that question for himself, remembering that they that die in the Lord are blessed, not only because they rest from their labours, but because their works do follow them.



